

AN INDEPENDENT BOARD OF EDUCATION FOR HARLEM

VICTOR SOLOMON

FOR many years the civil rights movement in America addressed itself *single-mindedly* to one problem: the desegregation of all aspects of American society. This goal was predicated on the idea that, as an American, the black man had every right to participate without restrictions in all segments of the society. There can be no question that in the early days of the movement many gains were made: It is now possible for a black man to travel in the South without having to sleep and eat in his car. It is now possible for a few carefully selected black children to attend integrated schools. Many jobs and opportunities have opened up in the North. All around, one can see evidences of the work of the early civil rights movement.

But in this year of 1968—more than a decade after the movement started, in Montgomery, when a seamstress refused to move to the back of the bus—people in the movement have taken stock of the situation of the black man in America and have noted that, for all the gains made, the lives of the masses of black people have remained essentially unchanged. In searching for the cause of this situation, these new observers wondered just how the civil rights movement failed; what *didn't* it do? They found an answer in the fact that never, during all the years of picketing, of sit-ins, of petitioning Congress for civil rights bills—during all those years of labor, no one, at any time, gave thought to the *psychology* of the black man. No one wondered “What now?” after the desegregation of a cafeteria. In short, the civil rights movement addressed itself to the surface conditions that contributed to the black man's second-class status, but did not consider any program that would erase the self-defeating self-hatred that is so prevalent among black people, or the absence of control by black people of their communities.

Some leaders of the early civil rights movement are now resting on their laurels, secure in the false notion that things are getting better

all the time. But things are not getting better; indeed, for many black men, particularly those in urban areas, they are getting worse. Despite civil rights bills, despite the poverty program, despite all the efforts of the old civil rights movement, there continues to exist in the black communities of this country a reality of powerlessness which will perpetuate itself forever unless we strike at the very root of the problem—the black man's image of himself and his lack of control over the institutions which control his life.

But where to begin? We suspect that for many adult members of the black community, it is already too late in the day. We therefore have to look to our black children and to the schools, the chief molders of their minds, for a beginning. We look to the schools, however, and we are confronted by a bulwark of mediocrity, a powerful instrument for perpetuating the very ills we seek to erase. At this point, despite appearances to the contrary, the school situation is not beyond hope. We propose to outline in this paper an idea for bringing about complete change in the Harlem schools. There have been so many proposals presented to correct the schools, so many analyses made of *The Problem*, so many "bold" new concepts studied and forgotten, that one may legitimately approach any new proposal with a certain amount of cynicism, convinced that it too will not solve the problem. We submit, however, that many programs failed because they were based on utopian or piecemeal concepts that had absolutely no relation to the reality of life in Harlem. The children of the race can no longer be sacrificed while we wait for some distant utopia. We are hopeful that the proposal which follows will be one around which Harlem parents and all community groups concerned with quality education can rally.

THE SCHOOLS IN HARLEM

Harlem is the largest black community in the world, and is many times the size of many autonomous communities throughout the country. Yet we have in Harlem a city within a city that has no control over its own destiny. The schools in Harlem offer a most dramatic illustration of this fact. To repeat statistics documenting the worsening conditions of Harlem schools is tantamount to belaboring the obvious. One need only go to statistics compiled by the Board of Education itself to find support for the charge of criminally inferior schools. In every conceivable way, education in Harlem is markedly inferior to standards maintained in schools in surrounding areas. The physical condition of the school buildings is poor. Old structures are in constant need of

repair, and maintenance becomes an uphill fight to avoid complete obsolescence. Buildings which were adequate decades ago cannot meet the present requirements of space and safety equipment.

The most damaging indictment that can be made of the Harlem schools is that they are failing to produce students who have a good working knowledge of the basic skills required to function in this highly competitive society. Not only are general achievement scores lower than in other sections of the city, but 85% of the students are at least a year below their supposed grade level in reading, and even lower in mathematics. Moreover, the schools are failing to provide children with a positive image of themselves and of their fellow black Americans. Staffed, for the most part, by white, middle-class teachers who bring with them preconceived notions about the inability of black children to learn in the classroom, the schools are little more than mills for nourishing and reinforcing the self-hatred already harboring in a black child when he enters school.

Similarities Between School Segregation in Harlem and in the South

For all practical purposes, schools in Harlem are operating under a condition of segregation, and there is no really valid difference between segregated schools in the South and segregated schools in the North, for the chief characteristic of a segregated system is that it is *imposed* on a group of people and *they* have no control over it. They do not control policy or direction, and are powerless to bring about meaningful changes. In New York City, as in the segregated schools of the South, the people of Harlem have no control over their schools. As in the South, we have a situation where white overlords are overseeing the education of black children. The elements of *choice and control* are the deciding difference between a system that is segregated from the rest of the school system and one that is *separated* from the rest of the school system. It's an indisputable fact that neither of these elements exists in the South's segregated schools or in Harlem schools. To entertain the thought that the segregated schools of the South might in some ways have a slight advantage over the segregated schools of Harlem may be horrifying to some people, but it is not too far-fetched. In the South, black pupils do, after all, get a chance to see black people in positions of authority in the schools. Lest someone seize upon this last statement with the intention of making capital, let us hasten to emphasize that we hold no brief for segregated schools, North *or* South.

The Failure of Integrated Education

The battle for school integration in New York City has raged for more than a decade; yet today the city's schools remain effectively segregated (separate and unequal).

The term "integrated schools" has become not only an empty slogan, but a deception.

It appears now that the idealistic goal of integrated schools for this city was not only unattainable, but undesirable. The campaigns against integration by white power groups such as PAT (Parents and Teachers) may be viewed from our 1968 perspective as blessings in disguise. For the drive for school integration was in fact a denial of black potential, black consciousness, and black beauty, based on two faulty and misguided assumptions:

(1) That school integration would counteract the powerlessness of blacks in their attempt to achieve the accountability of the white system to their community.

(2) That school integration would accomplish for the black segment of the population "acceptance" into the mainstream of American life.

The assumptions contain varying degrees of hopelessness, defeatism, and naivete when viewed from our present hindsight. Assumption one, that of deriving power from the white system simply by rubbing elbows with the power-holders, is more of a symptom of the illness than a cure.

Additionally, token integration failed to achieve even token accountability, because integration has in the past tended to really mean absorption of the black minority by the white majority, with a resultant clouding over of the minority's position, identity, and objectives. Therefore, no group demands for accountability emerged from the integrated situation because the group had lost sight of its individualized specific needs. The integrated students and the parents of those students contemplated their blackness in negative terms, if at all. Paradoxically, the strategy of pursuing integration as a tactical maneuver designed to increase the power of the black community results in a reduction of power in that community and the insertion of yet another obstacle (confusion) into the movement for black progress.

The second assumption, that an integrated school system would be a first stage in the "acceptance" of the black community, was similarly faulty. Forced integration cannot change teacher attitudes toward black students. Neither does it circumvent the disastrous effects of the tracking system in the city's schools. That system assigns a majority of the

"integrated" students to low-achievement classes and, once placed, a child more often than not continues in this bottom track throughout his school life. Tracking not only relates black students to classrooms in which education standards are below par, but subjects them to a situation in which a negative self-image is continually reinforced. Even those students whose basic skills meet majority standards are subjected to the psychological shock of learning that their group was historically irrelevant. Such students are motivated to imitate white standards in the hope of escaping the stigma of blackness. The "acceptance" sought by the black community had as a first requisite rejection of blackness—i.e., rejection of self.

New York-Harlem Core recently announced a dramatic breakthrough in its plan for the establishment of an autonomous Harlem School System. Harlem, the group stated, is a known educational disaster area. Thus far, piecemeal, demonstrably ineffectual methods have been tried to improve Harlem schools. These can be likened to treating advanced cancer with aspirins. The failure of the schools in Harlem to educate our children, and the resultant lack of confidence of Harlem citizens in our schools, have led to many violent confrontations between school and community. Such confrontations will increase in number and intensity unless the pattern of failure in Harlem schools is reversed. Clearly, bold new approaches are needed.

An act introduced in the New York State Legislature in the last session (Proposition 1226-A) would enable the State Commissioner of Education to form a temporary school district directly responsible to the state in depressed areas such as Harlem. The establishment of such a school district would bring parents, through their representatives, into closer contact with the schools, and thus make possible a new, mutually creative relationship between the parents and the schools. A Harlem school district would not be a small and inefficient unit; the pupil population of Harlem would make it the third largest school district in New York State. The formation of such a Harlem school district is considered a necessary step toward educational excellence in Harlem schools; without it, there is little hope for significant change in ghetto schools.