

Conventional historiography on *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the landmark Supreme Court decision calling for the end of racial segregation in America's public schools, describes it as a landmark decision that forever changed American race relations. This paper challenges that historiography. *Brown* arguably did more to elevate race relations and the issue of educational equal opportunity in the national consciousness than any other judicial decision before or since but did not contribute to the actual desegregation of America's public schools.

With the passage of *Brown II* in 1955, which was meant to outline the implementation of desegregation across the country, the Supreme Court made a grave error that would affect education policy and desegregation efforts for decades. Instead of mandating concrete timelines for implementation, the justices used the phrases "prompt and reasonable start," "earliest practicable date," and "with all deliberate speed".¹ This left the speed and scope of implementation in the hands of predominantly all-white local school boards. Not surprisingly, plans for desegregation across America remained few and far between prior to 1968.² Those schools that did attempt desegregation "with all deliberate speed", such as Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, faced enormous opposition and violence causing other cities to further delay implementation to avoid similar disruptions and conflict.³ Seattle public schools were no exception.

¹ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (II)*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955).

² Charles Vert Willie, *School Desegregation Plans That Work* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 1984), 5.

³ When Little Rock, Arkansas attempted to desegregate Central High School in 1957, Governor Orval Faubus directed National Guardsmen to block the entrance of the school, keeping the nine African American students attempting to enter out. President Eisenhower reluctantly dispatched paratroopers to Little Rock to ensure the safe entrance of the black students as an angry crowd taunted and threatened them. Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 753-754.

The passage of *Brown* went virtually unnoticed in Seattle except for an editorial in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* stating, “[t]here is no segregation in the schools of this state.”⁴ The *Seattle Times* made no comment at all and the minutes from the first post-*Brown* meeting of the school board made no mention of the ruling or of desegregation.⁵ Only after years of community meetings, numerous proposals submitted on behalf of local organizations, and threats of lawsuits, did the Seattle School Board finally respond to *Brown* in the form of the Voluntary Racial Transfer (VRT) program in August of 1963, almost a decade after *Brown I*.⁶

The VRT modified the neighborhood school concept in which students attended schools in their neighborhood to allow for voluntary transfers to “certain schools under certain circumstances.”⁷ In its first year (1963-4), 247 students participated in the VRT: 239 black and 8 white, 7 of which subsequently “reverse transferred.”⁸ At its peak (1967-8), 1,775 students participated: 1,631 black and 144 white.⁹ In any given year, the VRT only affected 4% of Seattle’s students.¹⁰ “Voluntariness,” it seemed, though more politically palatable than a mandatory program, failed to desegregate the Seattle School District. Too few students participated in the program and 90% of those that did

⁴ Doris H. Pieroth, “With All Deliberate Caution: School Integration in Seattle, 1954-1968,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 73 (1982): 50.

⁵ Pieroth, 50.

⁶ Pieroth, 51-53 and Ann LeGrelus Siqueland, *Without a Court Order: The Desegregation of Seattle’s Schools* (Seattle: Madrona, 1981), 11.

⁷ Frank Hanawalt, *The History of Desegregation in the Seattle Public Schools, 1954-1981* (Seattle Public Schools, 1981), 12.

⁸ *Ibid* and Quintard Taylor, “The Civil Rights Movement in the American West: Black Protest in Seattle, 1960-1970,” *Journal of Negro History* 80 (1995): 8.

⁹ Hanawalt, 13 and Pieroth, 54.

¹⁰ Willie, 174.

participate were African American students transferring out of the Central Area¹¹, not white students entering, leaving the Central Area racially unchanged.¹² Predominantly white schools like Queen Anne and Ingraham High Schools remained well over 90% white.¹³ Before long, the same civil rights groups that had lobbied for the VRT began to withdraw their support.¹⁴

As pressure from community groups mounted and the threat of a federal lawsuit by the NAACP loomed, the School Board finally adopted the Seattle Plan in December of 1977, over twenty years after *Brown I*.^{15 16} The Seattle Plan “was designed as a comprehensive desegregation program to eliminate racially imbalanced schools in Seattle by the fall of 1979” through the application of four components: zone organization, paired or triaded elementary schools, assignment patterns for secondary schools, and education options.¹⁷ The same year, the School Board introduced the Magnet Program. The intent of the Magnet Program, writes William Maynard, “was to place the programs in strategic schools to attract minority students to white schools and white students to minority schools” based on the appeal of particular programs to a particular racial

¹¹ The Central Area of Seattle historically has been a predominantly African-American section of the city.

¹² Integration occurring outside of the Central Area can arguably be attributed more to the South and Southeast migration in the 1970s of numerous black homeowners and renters into Rainier Valley and a smaller number into Mercer Island, Bellevue, and Snohomish County than to the VRT. Taylor, 7.

¹³ Taylor, 19 and Hanawalt, 4.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Hanawalt, 15-32 and Pieroth, 60-61.

¹⁶ Fear of a court-mandated desegregation plan came from the fact that the NAACP filed an official complaint with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare asking the federal government to investigate segregation in Seattle at the same time that the ACLU of Washington and the Church Council of Greater Seattle both threatened to file a lawsuit if a comprehensive desegregation plan was not adopted immediately and implemented effectively. Hanawalt, 32 and Willie, 121.

¹⁷ Hanawalt, 35-36.

group.¹⁸ The district undermined the potential effectiveness of this program by offering the same options at both predominantly white and predominantly non-white schools. For example, both Queen Anne High School (predominantly white) and Cleveland High School (predominantly non-white) offered the Business Administration Program, thereby decreasing the likelihood that white students transfer to Cleveland for that particular program and vice versa.¹⁹ In fact, only twelve students transferred to Cleveland for the Magnet Program in 1977.²⁰ Despite the VRT (1963), the Magnet Program (1977), and the Seattle Plan (1977), the Seattle School District remained “racially imbalanced” into the 1980s.

Natural migration, community pressure, and fear of federal lawsuits played larger roles in desegregating the Seattle School District (to the extent that it was desegregated) than *Brown I* or *II*. Philip Burton, a Seattle transplant from Topeka, Kansas who witnessed the desegregation battles in both cities, remarked, “[t]he 1954 *Brown* decision really didn’t make much of an impact on Seattle.”²¹ To make matters worse, by the time Seattle finally began implementing desegregation efforts in the late 1970s, America underwent a strong conservative shift and Seattle, like a number of other major cities such as Boston, Detroit, Hartford, Kansas City, and Norfolk, fell victim to anti-desegregation forces and less invidious forms of re-segregation.²² In the 1980s, most desegregation efforts across the country were dismantled or abandoned.

¹⁸ The “appeal” of certain programs to a particular racial group was based on surveys presented to all parents and students within the district. Willie, 120.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ “Magnet Gets Going,” *The Cleveland Journal*, September 29, 1977, pg. 1.

²¹ Siqueland, 10.

²² Gary Orfield and Susan E. Eaton, *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown v. Board of Education* (New York: The New Press, 1996), 57-60.

Education in America is an on-going experiment of turning ideals into reality. While *Brown* elevated issues of equal opportunity and desegregation to a place of prominence among students, parents, board members, scholars, educationists, and politicians, it did not succeed in achieving widespread, tangible results. Instead, efforts to desegregate America's public schools remain slow, tedious, and uneven.²³ While the racial composition of Seattle's schools did undergo dramatic changes in the second half of the Twentieth Century, those changes owe more to the slow, natural expansion of the black community out of the Central Area and to "white flight" than to concerted desegregation efforts on behalf of the school board. By leaving the scope and speed of desegregation in the hands of local school boards, the Supreme Court opened the door to decades of deferral and inaction.

This error in the phrasing of the Supreme Court's decision left generations of American students at a distinct social and educational disadvantage and weakened their ability to fully participate in American democracy. A strong representational democracy depends on equitable education of society's youth; without it, America tempts ignorance and tyranny.

²³ *Ibid.*