

Worsening, unchecked segregation in K-12 public schools

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This undated photo shows Linda Brown Smith. She was a third-grader when her father started a suit in 1951 known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. It led to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954 decision against school segregation. AP, File

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Poor, black and Hispanic children are once again going to separate schools from their white, wealthy peers, according to a new government report. It was released Tuesday, 62 years after the Supreme Court decided that segregated schools are unequal and against the constitution.

The historic Supreme Court decision was called *Brown v. Board of Education*. It forced the country to end dual school systems - one for white kids, one for black students. It also became a symbol of the ideal that public education is meant to give every child a fair shot at success.

But that ideal appears to be breaking apart, according to the report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO).

None Of The Same Opportunities

The number of high-poverty schools attended by mainly black and Hispanic students more than doubled between 2001 and 2014, the GAO found. A high-poverty school district is one where more than 75 percent of children receive free or cheaper lunches.

The problem is not just that students are more isolated, according to the GAO. Minority students in high-poverty schools don't have the same opportunities as students in other schools.

High-poverty, minority schools were less likely to offer a full range of math and science courses than other schools, for example. They were also more likely to expel and suspend students, according to the GAO.

School Segregation Is A Civil Rights Violation

Democratic lawmakers asked the GAO to conduct the study. Two of them, Virginia Representative Bobby Scott and Michigan Representative John Conyers, held a news conference Tuesday. They announced legislation that would make it easier for parents to sue school districts over civil rights.

Scott said the GAO report showed an "overwhelming failure to fulfill the promise of Brown."

"Segregation in public K-12 schools isn't getting better; it's getting worse, and getting worse quickly," he said. More than 20 million students of color now attend high-poverty, minority schools.

The resegregation of schools has, for the most part, happened quietly.

People have only begun talking recently about segregation. These discussions come amid national debates about race, racism and growing inequality.

50 Years Of Segregation In Mississippi

Racial divisions in the public schools were highlighted Friday. A federal judge ordered a Mississippi district to integrate its middle and high schools. The decision ended a legal battle that had dragged on for five decades.

As the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi put it, Cleveland, Miss. has been running an illegal dual system for its children. It failed year after year to reach the "greatest degree of desegregation possible."

Now all its students must go to one middle school and one high school.

Generations of students were deprived of the right to an integrated education, Judge Debra Brown wrote.

Edward Duvall is an African-American parent of two children in Cleveland's public schools. He said he favored merging the schools. He said it would save money, leaving more funding for classrooms and programs. But that wasn't his only reason: "We can break down this wall of racism that divides us and keeps us separated," he said in court documents. "And we could create a new culture in our school system that's going to unite us and unite our whole city."

Cleveland schools never fully desegregated. However, many other school districts did integrate following *Brown v. Board*. Since the 1990s, though, hundreds of school districts have gone backward.

Courts Stopped Paying Attention

In 1972, just 25 percent of black students in the South attended the most segregated schools, according to a 2014 ProPublica news investigation. In these schools, more than 90 percent of students were minorities and other students of color. Courts kept an eye on many of the districts. Between 1990 and 2011, though, judges stopped paying attention. In these districts, more than half of students now attend such segregated schools, ProPublica found.

During that time, the nation's overall student population changed, becoming poorer and less white. More than half of students are now low-income. Hispanic students are now the largest minority group in schools, and make up 25 percent of the overall student population.

Reversing The Damage

Yet, segregation can be reversed, according to Education Secretary John King Jr.

King said that the government must spend more money on "high-needs communities and high-needs kids." Government choices have created segregated housing and segregated schools.

"The lack of concern for poor people is deeply disturbing," King said.

Advocates for desegregation have criticized the Obama administration for not taking meaningful steps to deal with these problems.

Obama has suggested a budget that includes a \$120 million program to help local communities diversify their schools. The money would go for programs that could convince middle-class families to send their kids to high-poverty schools. The program does not have much of a chance of being passed by Republican-led Congress, though.