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A PROPOSAL FOR AN INDEPENDENT BOARD OF EDUCATION FOR HARLEM

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For many years the civil rights movement in America addressed itself singlemindedly 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 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 1967, more than a decade after the movement started in Birmingham 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. 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 an atmosphere of powerlessness which will perpetuate itself forever unless we strike at the very root of the problem--the black man's image of himself.

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 to follow 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 preconceived notions about the inability of black children to learn to the classroom, the schools are little more than mills for nourishing and re-enforcing 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 undisputable 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, in some ways, might 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 to Achieve Integrated Education

Attempts to integrate the New York City school system have failed completely and undisputably. We seriously doubt that there is anyone around who honestly believes that this is a goal that can be reached in the foreseeable

future. Many of the groups that campaigned for years for this "pie-in-the-sky" solution to the problem have ended their efforts and have now turned their attention to the pursuit of quality education. Integration failed in New York City because of (1) shifts in population and (2) the Board of Education's responsiveness to pressures from white groups opposed to any integration plan. This responsiveness was demonstrated again and again during the various campaigns for integrated schools when even the most half-hearted attempt on the part of the Board to carry out an integration plan was met with instant opposition from white groups. The Board would then either procrastinate or capitulate entirely. However desirable a goal integration may be for the future, its pursuit today will continue to end in failure.

The Failure of Compensated Education

In a recent report, the Civil Rights Commission noted that special programs such as New York's Higher Horizons consisted "more of showmanship than solid education" and that some of them "may be fraudulent window-dressing to divert Negro parents who want a fair deal for their children."

The various special programs instituted by the Board of Education have failed. The reason can be found in the fact that these exercises in pacification were panaceas that did not take cognizance of the larger problem. Like the doctor who doesn't really know what is wrong with his patient and decides to pacify him with an innocuous drug, special programs are simply an illustration of the extent of the system's lack of understanding of what is needed in the Harlem schools.

THE SOLUTION

It stands clear that any idea for improving the schools in Harlem is doomed to fail if the idea is to be carried out under the Board of Education

as it is presently structured. The educational system of New York City is large and cumbersome to administer. It is an old institution run by a settled and conservative bureaucracy that is inflexible and averse to change. Faced with running the world's largest school system, the Board has shown a singular lack of vision in dealing with the portion that is Harlem. The Board responds quickly and favorably to the white majority, and makes as few concessions as possible to the black minority. In Harlem the Board is confronted by a group that is different from most of the people to whom it is responsible, and, more importantly, has less power. The Board has not met this challenge, and it now appears that it will never have the will, the understanding, or the know-how to do so. In short, the Board has abdicated its responsibility to the Harlem community and should therefore be replaced by an independent board of education for Harlem.

An independent board of education for Harlem can be effective in bringing about changes needed to improve the schools because:

1. It will not be confronted with two groups with conflicting interests.
2. It will not be the entrenched bureaucracy that is the main drawback of the present Board. As a result, it will be completely open to new ideas, new programs, and new concepts that may seem like heresy if viewed in light of the standards maintained by the present system.
3. The people themselves will not feel that they are dealing with an alien group that does not have their best interest at heart, and will therefore be more likely to participate actively in the building of better schools.