

A QUESTION OF EQUITY

As educators focus on
the achievement gap,
the importance of school
integration is up for debate

AS NEW ENGLAND prepared to cheer on the Boston Red Sox starting nine at Fenway Park in late October, another starting nine basked in their own standing “O” a few miles away at Faneuil Hall. The Little Rock Nine hailed from Arkansas. They integrated the all-white Central High School in 1957, three years after a unanimous US Supreme Court declared the “separate but equal” doctrine in public education unconstitutional in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case.

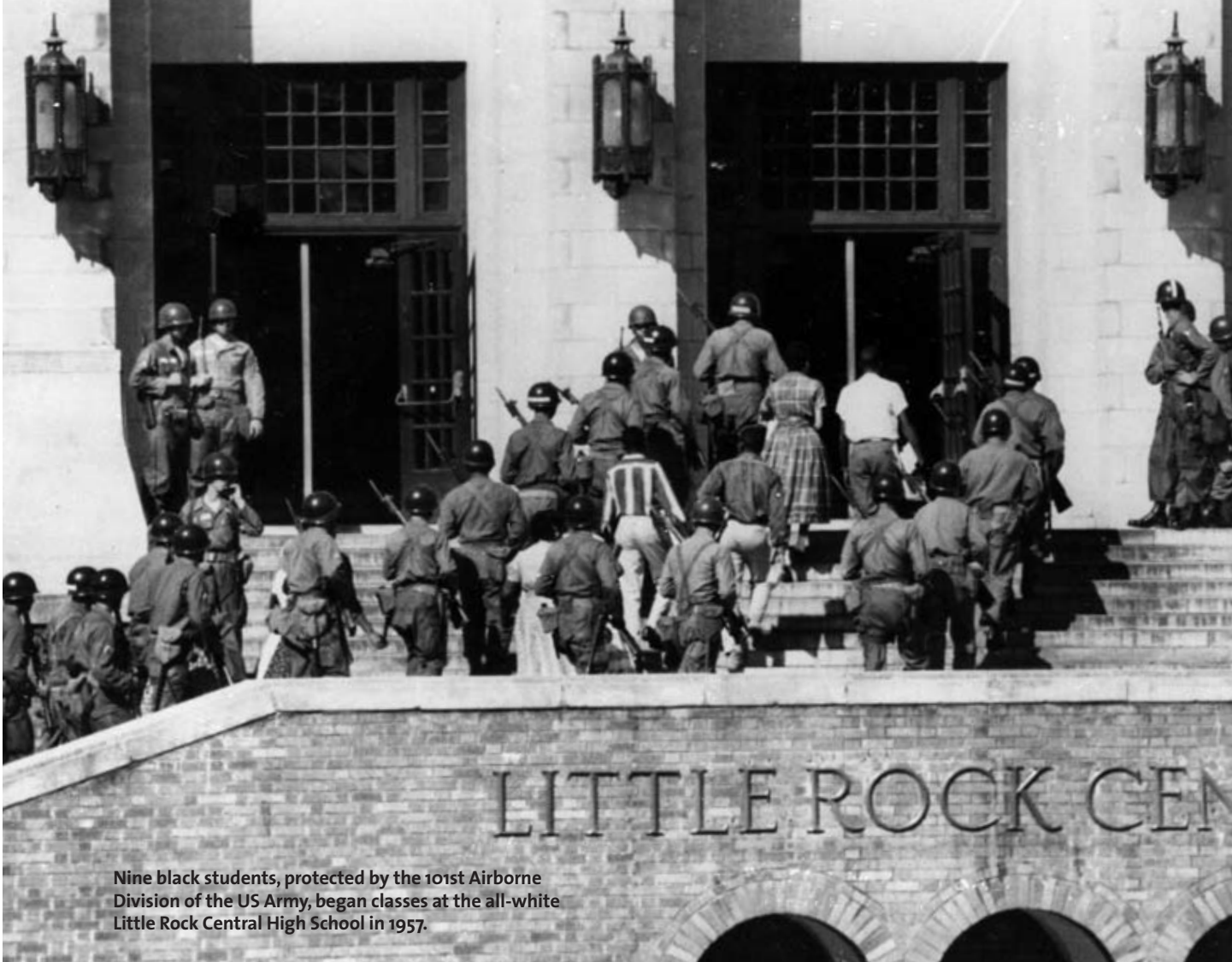
In their quest for educational equity, the six young women and three men braved the worst abuses that whites in the small Southern city could conjure up. At the 50th-anniversary celebration of the civil rights milestone, attended by seven of the nine students, Harvard Law Professor Charles Ogletree Jr. called them “national treasures.” Ernest Green, one of the Little Rock Nine, was more modest. He said simply, “We had a vision about connecting education and opportunity.”

Now a gray-haired managing director with the investment bank Lehman Brothers, Green explained that Central High

was all about “more options.” For Green and his peers, pursuing a quality education meant going to a school with qualified teachers, challenging curricula, and up-to-date facilities—all of which were lacking in the segregated schools that blacks attended. That education, in turn, was a gateway to good jobs, homeownership, and other opportunities that previous generations of African-Americans could scarcely fathom.

But a half-century later, the school integration movement has fallen on hard times. Over the past 30 years the Supreme Court has gradually pulled back from its endorsement of desegregation efforts. In its most recent decision, the high court ruled last June that school districts in Seattle and Louisville cannot use race as the sole criterion in voluntary desegregation plans. Many civil rights advocates and educators viewed the decision as a major setback, and it provided a somber backdrop to the Faneuil Hall tribute to the Little Rock Nine. “The Court did everything to overrule *Brown* but say so,”

BY GABRIELLE GURLEY | PHOTOS BY MICHAEL MANNING



Nine black students, protected by the 101st Airborne Division of the US Army, began classes at the all-white Little Rock Central High School in 1957.

said Gov. Deval Patrick, his voice rising with indignation during his remarks at the event. “You can’t tell me that it doesn’t make a difference right here in Massachusetts.”

In the Bay State, the latest attempt to dismantle the state’s remaining voluntary desegregation plans came days after the Supreme Court decision. A multiracial group of plaintiffs in Lynn filed a new challenge in federal court to the city’s 20-year-old voluntary desegregation program, five years after federal courts declared the city’s plan constitutional. There has also been concern that the Supreme Court ruling could imperil Metco, the voluntary busing program that sends black and Latino students from Boston and Springfield to suburban districts, though no formal action has been filed and state officials continue to express confidence that the program could withstand a constitutional challenge. And in December, Milton narrowly escaped a lawsuit over its re-districting plan, which moved some white children to a school that was mostly minority.

The changing attitudes alarm those who continue to view school integration as a way to improve both educational opportunity and race relations. “Though it was often imperfectly implemented and sometimes poorly designed, school integration was, on average, a successful policy, linked to a period of social mobility and declining gaps in achievement and school completion and improved attitudes and understanding among the races,” wrote Gary Orfield, co-director of UCLA’s Civil Rights Project, in a report last year on school desegregation in America.

While some educators lament the turn away from school integration, others say the goal today is high achievement for minority children regardless of the racial makeup in classrooms. Such an approach may be driven by a recognition that desegregation plans are losing their legal footing—as well as the fact that desegregation efforts no longer appear feasible within many large urban districts, where minority students make up an overwhelming share of the public school



The “Little Rock Nine” were honored at Boston’s Faneuil Hall last October.

population. But the shift is also a product of the new education focus on standards and accountability, and the idea that predominantly minority schools can achieve at high levels.

This line of thinking lies behind efforts in Boston and other cities that have so far created a small cadre of urban schools “of excellence.” With minority-majority enrollments and a high percentage of students from lower-income families, such schools have defied stereotypes about the achievement levels that are possible in such settings.

As the battles to preserve Metco and other remaining voluntary desegregation programs continue, providing opportunity for black and Latino students may depend more on

replicating urban education models that have demonstrated success in closing the achievement gap.

In sharp contrast to the days of the Little Rock Nine, the integration model today—in the face of declining judicial support, a focus on state and federal standards, and demographic shifts—seems to operate only at the margins as a vehicle for improving achievement among children of color.

RAISING THE STAKES

The *Brown* decision didn’t mean that doors to educational opportunity for African-Americans opened instantly. A second Supreme Court ruling, a year after the initial 1954 decision, counseled “all deliberate speed” in desegregating schools but instead ushered in a decade’s worth of foot-dragging. Not until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 put federal power behind desegregation with the threat of lawsuits and funding cuts did school officials and community leaders across the country begin to face up to the issue.

Massachusetts plunged into the fray the following year by passing the nation’s first state law designed to

confront public school segregation. The Racial Imbalance Act came about after state Education Commissioner Owen Kiernan released a report documenting the harmful effects of segregation both on the educational process and on society overall.

The Racial Imbalance Act, in its own words, “encourag[es] all school committees to adopt as educational objectives the promotion of racial balance and the correction of existing racial imbalance in the public schools.” It points to the re-drawing or altering of school assignment boundaries and the selection of new school sites as opportunities to prevent or eliminate racial imbalance.

“A lot of what it accomplished was to raise the stakes and to get people to deal seriously with the fact that education had to be made adequate for minority students,” says Charles Glenn, the interim dean at Boston University’s School of Education and the self-described “Mr. Busing” who crafted the desegregation plans in Boston, Lynn, and other districts.

Boston’s resistance to addressing school segregation led to Judge W. Arthur Garrity’s historic 1974 order that sent buses rolling between white and black schools—and unleashed a period of violence and racial strife. In the 40 years since the state law was enacted, however, other districts like Lynn have quietly adopted desegregation plans, mostly voluntarily and without incident.

The racial imbalance law survived a state high court challenge shortly after its passage, and a 1973 attempt by legislators to repeal the law led to a veto by Gov. Frank Sargent. But the renewed legal challenge to the Lynn plan casts some doubt over the law’s future. The Seattle and Louisville cases have also put pressure on other school officials in Massachusetts, forcing more than 20 districts with plans approved under the racial imbalance law to review and tweak them to withstand challenges based on the ruling.

COMPELLING INTEREST

In December 2006, Richard Cole walked out of the US Supreme Court after hearing the arguments in the Seattle and Louisville cases, convinced that the justices would completely scrap voluntary desegregation plans for schools. The former Massachusetts assistant attorney general, who defended the Lynn desegregation plan during its first court

In contrast to Boston, Lynn and other districts have quietly adopted desegregation plans.

challenge, had filed a friend-of-the-court brief on behalf of the Commonwealth, arguing that regardless of what happened to Seattle and Louisville, other districts like Lynn had desegregation plans with different histories that were essential to the needs of their students.

For Cole, Justice Anthony Kennedy’s concurring opinion was therefore some consolation in an otherwise disheartening ruling. Kennedy maintained that school districts had “compelling interests” in achieving diversity and avoiding racial isolation. Programs “narrowly tailored” to achieve those goals were permissible as long as they did not resort to “sweeping race-based classifications,” he wrote. Kennedy also rejected

the idea that “the Constitution requires school districts to ignore the de facto resegregation of schools.”

Cole reads Kennedy’s qualifier this way: First, if school districts want to specifically use race in making assignments to promote integration, they must show that other options won’t work. Second, officials have to demonstrate why a plan matters to their district.

Confidence that the Lynn plan will stand up in court is running high. Unlike Boston, the Lynn schools have retained a sizeable population of white students, with 42 percent of all students Latino, 30 percent white, 13 percent African-American, and 10 percent Asian. The city’s voluntary desegregation plan allows a child to attend his or her neighborhood school regardless of race. When a parent requests a transfer to a different school, however, such moves are approved only as long as they do not upset the racial balance in the current or destination school. Lynn school officials declined to comment for this article, citing the pending litigation.

When US District Court Judge Nancy Gertner ruled in favor of Lynn’s program in 2003, she found that it required neither race-based assignments nor forced busing, and that it permitted neighborhood schools and transfers. “It was clear that the Lynn Plan played an important role in creating a thriving, diverse, and integrated urban school system,” she wrote, “where race relations are positive and ethnic tensions are absent.” She also took note of recent gains in test scores and the “uniformly” high attendance rates in Lynn schools under the plan.

The US Supreme Court has twice declined to hear challenges to the Lynn plan. Cole believes that the high court turned down the Lynn case in 2005, when the Seattle and

Louisville cases were in the pipeline, because there was consensus that the plan had the strongest record on education, race relations, and other areas. Chester Darling, the attorney who is pursuing the new lawsuit against Lynn in the wake of the Seattle and Louisville ruling, maintains that the plan is unconstitutional. “What we are talking about here is a constitutional transgression,” says Darling. “It’s benign in a sense of what they are trying to do with diversity, but it’s injuring individual people on the basis of their color.”

SIDESTEPPING INTEGRATION

Integration has lost momentum outside of the courts as well. More than two decades ago, the quality of US public education overall began to come in for harsh criticism. The 1983 federal report *A Nation at Risk* exposed an “unthinking, unilateral educational disarmament” that was leading to a “rising tide of mediocrity” in US schools. In 1993, Massachusetts responded to the calls to improve schools by passing the

Education Reform Act, which demanded quantum leaps in student achievement, including the MCAS graduation requirement. In return, the state committed hundreds of million of dollars in new spending, much of it directed to poorer districts.

“Education reform was about how to deliver a higher quality education to the greatest number of children in the Commonwealth,” says Paul Reville, chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Education and an architect of the reform law. He says school integration wasn’t a primary strategy. “Education reform, at some certain level, was race-blind,” says Reville. While that has put the standards movement at odds with the decades-long push for school integration, the push for accountability in public schools has, in large part, been driven by a recognition of the achievement gap that has black and Latino students lagging substantially behind their white and Asian peers.

“I think most people have come to believe that you have got to do something around what happens in the classroom in order to affect quality, not just focus on who is walking in the door,” says Jim Peyser, who served as chairman of state Board of Education from 1999 to 2006.

That’s a view that rankles educators like Robert Peterkin, who heads the Urban Superintendents Program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. “Those folks who are solely relying on the standards movement are delusional if they think that students are going to catch up without some attention to who those students are,” he says. Because of the inferior resources often found in largely minority schools and districts, Peterkin says, there is still a synergy between integration and standards. “It seems to me you can’t separate them because as we find pockets of poor students

The new educational focus is on ‘what happens in the classroom’ rather than ‘who is walking in the door.’

and students of color, it becomes an education issue, it becomes a resource issue.”

Whether integrating students actually affects educational outcomes remains a contentious subject. “While there has been rigorous academic debate around that question, I

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The Roxbury Preparatory Charter School (seen above and at right), with an all-minority student body, posts some of the highest MCAS scores in the state.



years before the busing crisis, and black middle-class parents have followed. That means there are increasing numbers of families of color seeking out smaller communities like Framingham, Holbrook, and Marlborough. But it has also become harder to imagine how schools could be broadly integrated in many of the state's larger urban districts and the suburbs that ring them, which remain largely segregated by race.

In Boston, more than 85 percent of public school students belong to minority groups. In Lawrence, the school population is nearly 90 percent Latino. Meanwhile, Metco only makes a tiny dent in its racially isolated suburban partner schools. With an enrollment of 3,300 students in 37 towns and a waiting list of 15,000 more, the \$20 million program doesn't come close to meeting demand. When suburban communities call to find out how they can participate, Metco head Jean McGuire tells them funds for expansion simply aren't available.

So for many black and Latino students in the state, integrated schools are not an option. But some education leaders argue that integration is not the appropriate remedy in any case. Jeff Howard, founder and president of the Efficacy Institute, a Waltham-based nonprofit dedicated to education reform, says schools have to demonstrate that they can get a high standard of attainment with black and brown kids wherever they are. "I wholeheartedly disagree with people who think that we should be doing [integration] so that we can get better achievement with kids," says Howard.

Indeed, there are high-performing, predominantly minority schools in Massachusetts and across the country that are demonstrating that they can close the achievement gap. The Roxbury Preparatory Charter School, a middle school whose students are all African-American or Latino, posted the highest percentage of students in the state (94 percent) scoring advanced or proficient on the 2007 eighth-grade MCAS math test. With a dedicated teaching staff, a school culture that stresses success and achievement, and the latitude to operate free of the strictures of the city's district schools, Roxbury Prep outpaced students in tony suburbs

think the evidence suggests, on the whole, no, there aren't academic benefits," says Abigail Thernstrom, a former member of the state Board of Education and current vice chair of the US Commission on Civil Rights. However, a report last year from the National Academy of Education found that "African-American student achievement is enhanced by less segregated settings," though more so in earlier grades than in later grades. It also found that white students were not harmed academically by desegregation or by other changes in the racial makeup of schools. (Curiously, given the intense spotlight on the issue, there have been no comprehensive studies of Metco students' academic achievement.)

The inequity that predominantly minority districts start with is "very, very large, so closing achievement gaps is very difficult," says Josh Bogin, director of Springfield's magnet school program. "I don't think, candidly, we know enough about the extent to which racial or ethnic integration is a substantial factor by itself in closing the achievement gap."

When it comes to the push for school integration, the reality on the ground has also changed the calculus. White middle-class families fled the Boston schools, some of them



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It's "delusional" to think that the standards movement can close the achievement gap by itself, says Robert Peterkin of the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

like Weston and Wellesley. Yet even officials at that school admit that things could be different.

"I fully believe that even in a place like Boston, that's very segregated still in terms of its neighborhoods, that we wouldn't see the amount of white flight that we are seeing today if the schools in the city were performing at an incredibly high level," says Roxbury Prep co-director Joshua Phillips.

BETTER TOGETHER

In November, students in Melanie Konstandakis's Arlington High School class on "Race, Society, and Identity" invited peers of different racial and ethnic backgrounds to a pre-Thanksgiving breakfast discussion about race in the high school and in the wider town, a participant in the Metco program. After the breakfast, the 20 or so seniors, about a quarter of them minority students, critiqued the event.

Some groups dove into questions like, "Have you ever been a minority? How does it make you feel?" Others shut down conversation completely, leaving their peer leaders stymied. Disturbed by the pattern of all-white-and-Asian honors classes at the school, with African-American and Latino students bunched in standard-level courses, Konstandakis decided to offer the multi-level class. Her goal? Getting kids who live the daily reality of race to communicate with others who rarely give it a thought. "I want these kids in the same room," she says. "I want them to talk about this topic."

Some educators argue that this "democratic element"—

bringing together students of different racial and ethnic background and fostering positive interactions—has intrinsic educational value. In *Brown*, the justices saw education as “a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values.” That idea is a key to Metco, according to Kahris McLaughlin, president of the Metco board of directors. “You can’t teach people about how to live together unless you

Some educators argue that bringing together different races has intrinsic educational value.


actually give them that real opportunity,” she says.

Karen Horner, mother of a Lynn middle-schooler and two high school graduates, agrees. When school officials said her youngest son couldn’t attend the school she preferred because the move would alter the racial balance of school he would leave, Horner, who grew up in Boston and was a Metco student herself, had “no problem” with that decision.

She believes that integrated schools offer a host of social benefits that segregated schools do not. “To me, the plan works,” says Horner.

One of the reasons Lynn pursued its voluntary desegregation plan was to address concerns about racial tension and violence. Students of different backgrounds who navigate diverse environments learn to interact more productively, which helps undermine stereotyped messages and racial group cliques, according to Cole, the former assistant attorney general. As a result, he says, violence in the Lynn schools has plummeted as the atmosphere for learning, especially in the middle and high schools, has improved. “You cannot learn if schools are not safe and if you have race relations that are polarized,” says Cole.

But US Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, part of the majority in last year’s decision against the Seattle and Louisville programs, concluded that “no democratic element can support the integration interest.” And Darling, the lawyer handling the new challenge to Lynn’s voluntary desegregation plan, scoffs at the idea that putting diverse groups of kids together has educational benefits in a multiracial democracy. “If somebody said that to me, I’d




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suggest that they hug a couple of more trees and eat a couple of more granola bars and graze on some more bean sprouts," he says.

INTEGRATION: THE NEXT GENERATION

Some school districts have already steered away from race-based assignments. Boston abandoned the use of race in 2000. To avoid a court test of its desegregation plan, Cambridge switched to using socioeconomic status as the primary factor in assigning students.

In many conversations about educational equity, class has replaced race. But plans like those in Cambridge, which rely on income, can also unintentionally resegregate students and stir up as much resistance from middle-class parents as plans based on race do. *The Boston Globe* reported last July that about 60 percent of Cambridge's 12 elementary schools are now racially imbalanced, compared with less than 40 percent in 2001-2002, before the adoption of the socioeconomic criteria.

That leaves expanded school choice programs as a potential vehicle for school integration. The best pilot and charter schools can attract a heterogeneous student body,

but many are as segregated as their traditional counterparts. Magnet schools, which are open to all children throughout a district, can also attract a multiracial group of children. Springfield, the only school district in the state still under a Supreme Judicial Court desegregation order, received a fifth consecutive, three-year magnet school grant in September 2007, totaling \$3.1 million, for five new schools under a US Department of Education magnet program designed to

The best pilot and charter schools attract a diverse student body, but many remain segregated.

eliminate, reduce, or prevent minority-group isolation in districts with high numbers of minority students. "Magnet schools have quite a strong record as an integration vehicle," says Harvard's Peterkin.

Relying on a hodgepodge of traditional district schools, pilots, charters, and magnets isn't going to solve the inte-



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gration riddle, however. And there is little appetite for an inter-district choice system that could integrate schools on a regional basis, the one move that could dramatically reshape the racial composition of schools. "I never heard a serious conversation about that in Massachusetts," says Reville, the state Board of Education chairman. Most of the districts encircling large majority-minority cities like Boston and Lawrence do not accept nondistrict transfer students.

Reville suggests that some communities are at capacity and would be hard-pressed to accept more students. And the others? "I guess you have to ask if it is coincidence that most of the communities around most of the major cities with high concentrations of minorities choose not to [accept nondistrict students]," Reville says. "Or does that pattern reflect some bias?"

REDEFINING EQUITY

"In nearly every state, the question of mixed and separate schools was a matter of much debate and strong feeling" wrote W.E.B. Du Bois, the African-American social scientist and Great Barrington native, more than 70 years ago. Conditions have improved on the road from Little Rock to Lynn, but DuBois's observation remains true.

De jure school segregation has been swept into the dustbin of history. Nevertheless, parent Karen Horner uses the same words to describe what the Lynn plan means to her today that Ernest Green used to describe what integration of Little Rock's Central High School meant 50 years ago: Education and opportunity. For them, school integration continues to be the way to link those two strands in a multi-racial democracy. Others voice hope that remaining integration programs will survive. "I'm confident that Lynn and Metco are programs that are not only viable, but exemplary, and will withstand what I expect to be persistent and long-term challenges to things that are doing a good job," says Harvard's Ogletree.

However, with the energy sapped out of the integration crusade for all but a few select programs, most students in Massachusetts won't have the opportunity to attend racially mixed schools. For some, like the Efficacy Institute's Jeff Howard, that development is of little consequence, as they strive to create schools that will stimulate academic excellence closer to home. "My dream is the situation where in 10 years in this country, we have so many virtually all-black and or all-Latino schools that are achieving at the very highest levels of proficiency that white folks are demanding integration," he says. **CW**

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