

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

**Charles T. Clotfelter: After Brown**

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2004, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to [permissions@pupress.princeton.edu](mailto:permissions@pupress.princeton.edu)

## Introduction

Our decision, therefore, cannot turn on merely a comparison of these tangible factors in the Negro and white schools involved in each of the cases. We must look instead to the effect of segregation itself on public education.  
*Earl Warren, Brown v. Board of Education, 1954<sup>1</sup>*

**T**HE CHANGES wrought by school desegregation since the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision have been at times dramatic, uneven, and subject to reversal. As illustration, consider two school districts in the formerly segregated South.

The first is Taylor County, Georgia, situated between Macon and Columbus, some ninety miles south of Atlanta. A news item that appeared on the national wires in the spring of 2003 reported on a practice there that seemed to bespeak a bygone era: racially segregated proms. Following the desegregation of the county's public schools in the fall of 1971, school officials at Taylor County High, like those in many other districts in the South, decided to discontinue the tradition of holding a spring-time prom, allowing instead separate, privately sponsored proms for white and black students. This practice continued until 2002, when, for the first time, a single, integrated prom was held. The next year, however, most white students voted to revert to their all-white prom. Another prom, open to blacks and whites, was held at nearby Fort Valley State University.<sup>2</sup> Thus, five decades after the landmark *Brown* decision, in a high school evenly split between white and black students, this one part of high school life remained every bit as segregated as it had been in the days of de jure segregation.<sup>3</sup>

A second school district is the Winston-Salem / Forsyth Schools, located in the western piedmont of North Carolina. This district illustrates the sweeping change that desegregation brought to the formerly segregated South, as well as its vulnerability to reversal. In 1969, after a decade of minimalist steps taken by reluctant school officials, very few of the district's students attended racially mixed schools. Although 28 percent of its students were nonwhite, all but ten of its sixty-eight schools

## INTRODUCTION

had enrollments that were 90–100 percent white or nonwhite. Suddenly, in 1970, as a result of a desegregation order, the district's schools became nearly racially balanced, with only two schools in either 90-plus percent category by 1971.<sup>4</sup> Between 1969 and 1971, the percentage of black students attending 90-plus percent nonwhite schools fell from 84 percent to 3 percent. And for the next twenty-three years the district's schools remained racially balanced. Then, in 1995, a newly elected school board, freed by the courts from continuing its racial balance plan, instituted a new "controlled choice" plan that allowed parents to express their preferences for schools within their part of the district, guaranteeing them one of their top three choices. Although school administrators expressed the hope that the resulting school assignments would produce schools that departed from the systemwide racial composition by no more than 20 percent, this limitation was not enforced, in spite of complaints of growing racial disparities among the district's schools.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the district's schools steadily became racially imbalanced. The percentage of black students attending 90-plus percent nonwhite schools increased from 0 in the fall of 1994, to 6 percent in 1996, 13 percent in 1998, 21 percent in 2000, and 22 percent in 2002.<sup>6</sup> Thus, during the fifth decade after the *Brown* decision, Winston-Salem's schools were gradually resegregating.

Whatever else might be said about racial patterns in these two school districts, the degree of interracial contact their students experienced in 2004 was far more extensive than it had been a half-century before. Even the most cursory glance backward in time reveals change in the racial makeup of American public schools that is little short of breathtaking. Consider what schools looked like before 1954. As a result of the official segregation that existed in more than twenty states, some 40 percent of the nation's students attended schools that were segregated by law.<sup>7</sup> Tens of thousands more students attended schools that were every bit as segregated, but by virtue of starkly uneven residential patterns rather than by legal sanction. In the ensuing decades schools that had been under the regime of de jure segregation experienced marked increases in interracial contact, and so did many others where segregation had not been enforced by law. As impressive as it was, however, this general increase in interracial contact was diminished by two contrary tendencies. One was the stubborn continuation of pockets of segregation, such as Taylor County's all-white prom. The other was an unmistakable trend in the direction of resegregation, as illustrated by the Winston-Salem / Forsyth district.

The purpose of this book is to document the course of school desegregation over the half-century since the *Brown* decision. It uses as its

## INTRODUCTION

basic marker of change the degree of interracial contact in schools. It measures the extent of that contact in schools, both public and private, over as much of the half-century since the *Brown* decision as available data allow. It compares patterns of interracial contact across regions in the country, in communities both inside and outside metropolitan areas.<sup>8</sup>

Why the focus on contact? The most obvious reason to do so is its central importance to state-sponsored segregation. The fact at the heart of both the apartheid practiced in the American South and the *Brown* decision that ruled it unconstitutional was the physical separation of the races. In a legal leap based in part on social science research, the Supreme Court concluded that separate schools were “inherently unequal,” making unnecessary further comparison of the school facilities available to students of different races. Left unsettled by *Brown*, however, was whether racial segregation in schools brought about by segregated residential patterns—so-called de facto segregation—might not also be vulnerable to constitutional challenge. Ultimately, the court would reject this interpretation, making state action to segregate schools the necessary condition for federal intervention.

One might argue that, in assessing a policy such as school desegregation, the dimensions of interest should be the quality of resources available to students or socially significant outcomes such as its effects on academic achievement, self-esteem, attitudes, interracial friendships, or long-term social and economic success. Although these considerations are undeniably important, even crucial, in any full assessment of desegregation, no one study can do justice to all of them. Instead, I focus on an aspect that is a necessary intermediary for virtually all potential effects of desegregation—interracial contact. Contact lies at the heart of some theories about how desegregation might affect young people. Psychologist Gordon Allport’s “contact theory,” for example, asserts that contact is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the reduction of racial prejudice. To have this beneficial effect, the contact must embody equal status and a common objective, and it must enjoy official approval.<sup>9</sup> Theories of labor market success based on information and social connections also require contact. Any number of theories of academic achievement also factor in the effects of peers. And some models of political economy imply that the distribution of resources depends on the distribution of students, that blacks would not receive equal educational facilities until they attended the same schools as whites. Thus, while interracial contact is by no means the whole story nor the only metric by which effects might be measured, it does represent a signifi-

## INTRODUCTION

cant aspect of schools and a necessary ingredient for important potential processes that social scientists have identified.

Interracial contact in schools also has direct relevance to several important issues in education policy. Most obviously, it relates to the policy of school desegregation itself. How the federal courts have come to interpret *Brown* and refine its constitutional mandate is a question of undiminished importance to both constitutional lawyers and local school boards. The Supreme Court's growing reluctance to require racial balance has been blamed for the resegregation noted by observers of public schools.<sup>10</sup> It is not too much to suggest that some observers believe the era of school desegregation may be drawing to a close.<sup>11</sup> Given the widely acknowledged importance of school desegregation as a component of social policy, a shift of this significance surely deserves careful documentation. Fears of increased racial segregation have also helped drive discussions of school vouchers and school choice proposals; detractors worry that such policies would make it easier for middle-class white families to choose predominantly white schools.<sup>12</sup>

Interracial contact also has direct relevance to the use of ability grouping or academic tracking. These policies are employed widely at all levels of education, particularly in high schools. Justified on the basis that homogeneous classes make for more effective instruction, tracking policies have been decried by critics who argue that their criteria for grouping are often capricious, the assignments they create are usually irreversible, and their educational benefits are dubious.<sup>13</sup> Since these policies tend to decrease the amount of interracial contact within schools, especially when assignment to groups is subject to racial bias, their use quite clearly bears on interracial contact in schools.

Ultimately, patterns of interracial contact have the potential to influence educational outcomes. Consider the distribution of resources in the schools. If whites and nonwhites tend to be in different schools, the possibility exists that students in these racial groups will be exposed to different levels of resources or teachers of different quality. As an illustration that segregation may have this effect, two recent studies suggest that nonwhites are more likely than whites to be taught by inexperienced teachers.<sup>14</sup> If schools are racially balanced, however, such differences simply cannot arise except between classrooms; and if classrooms are racially balanced, they cannot arise at all.

Quite apart from its implications for the distribution of school resources, interracial contact may bring about outcomes of considerable social value. Consider three sets of possible outcomes: academic achieve-

ment, job market success, and racial tolerance. First, from at least the days of the Coleman Report in 1966, some researchers have held out the possibility that interracial contact in schools may itself have a positive impact on the achievement gains of minority students, without causing any offsetting losses among whites. Second, some evidence has suggested that integration may improve the life prospects of minority students by giving them access to social networks formerly open primarily to whites. A third potential benefit of interracial contact is that suggested by Allport's contact theory: under the right conditions, contact can lead to productive interracial relations and thereby enhance racial tolerance. More broadly, interracial contact is important simply because of the significance of racial and ethnic diversity itself. Whatever else its effects may be, interracial contact in schools offers students from all racial and ethnic groups the chance to learn about living in a diverse society. In his study of American race relations a decade before the *Brown* decision, Gunnar Myrdal observed: "One of the effects of social segregation is isolation of Negroes and whites. The major effects of isolation are, of course, on Negroes. Contrary to popular opinion, however, there are bad effects on whites also, and these are increasing as the level of Negro cultural attainment is rising. . . . Whether they know it or not, white people are dwarfing their minds to a certain extent by avoiding contacts with colored people."<sup>15</sup> In light of the society's growing racial and ethnic diversity, the force of this statement with regard to schools has surely grown since Myrdal wrote it. For all of these reasons, there can be little doubt that interracial contact holds considerable policy significance.

#### HOW MUCH DID INTERRACIAL CONTACT CHANGE AFTER 1954?

A primary aim of this book is to document changes in interracial contact over time. One of the best illustrations of the results of judicial and executive branch measures to desegregate formerly segregated schools remains Gary Orfield's *Public School Desegregation in the United States, 1968–1980*, which presents a summary by region of the percentage of black students who attended schools that were 90–100 percent nonwhite in enrollment. He shows that by this measure black students were more racially isolated in the South than in any other region in 1968. Whereas 78 percent of the South's black students attended such schools, the corresponding percentage in all other regions was 60 percent or less. To be sure, this measure is not a perfect indicator of segregation, as it reflects

## INTRODUCTION

in part the overall racial makeup of regions.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, it provides an easily comprehended metric and is an illuminating marker of changes over time for a given region. As a result of the federal government's vigorous pursuit of desegregation beginning in 1968, racial isolation measured in this way declined precipitously in the South, transforming its schools from the most to the least segregated in the country. The percentage of black students in the South who attended 90–100 percent minority schools fell between 1968 and 1972 from 78 percent to 25 percent. By 1972, the region with the next lowest corresponding percentage was the West, where 43 percent of its black students attended such schools.

As compelling as it may be, this statistical record of changes wrought after 1968 still misses what went before. One of the aims of the present study is to extend the historical field of view to cover as much of the period since 1954 as possible. Thus I use unpublished data from the period before 1968 to chart the trends in interracial contact for selected districts and by region. Not only does this analysis provide new evidence on the degree of school segregation outside the South in the 1950s and early 1960s, it also allows for an assessment of changes in segregation over a longer period in all regions. And, in light of the steady relaxation of judicial oversight of desegregation orders beginning in the 1990s and the prospect of resegregation observed in previously desegregated school districts, it is necessary to extend the measurement of interracial contact into the new century.

Documenting changes in interracial contact over the last fifty years is one thing. Assigning causation is another. Did *Brown* bring about the well-documented reductions in segregation? I believe it is virtually impossible to isolate the effect of the 1954 decision or indeed the subsequent major Supreme Court decisions in light of the other powerful forces at work during the same period. For one thing, the 1964 Civil Rights Act gave to the executive branch a powerful lever—funding—to use to encourage school districts to comply with court decrees and other federal law. In addition, the manifold changes brought about by the civil rights movement, not the least of which was the Voting Rights Act of 1965 but also including actions in state legislatures and local school boards and changing attitudes on the part of ordinary citizens, surely influenced the direction of change as well. For these reasons, I generally sidestep the question of causation. Rather, I focus on documenting measurable changes in interracial contact, noting where appropriate the coincident events of the time.

## THE BLUNTING OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Using the yardstick of interracial contact, one is tempted to ask whether school desegregation has been a “success.” To what extent did desegregation measures break down the barriers of racial separation that previously existed? In light of the large declines in racial isolation, one is almost compelled to judge the policy a success, perhaps a great success, for the changes accomplished in its wake were undeniably significant. Yet that judgment inevitably will be tempered by the failure of school desegregation to achieve *more*. Owing to the very nature of the process, the success of school desegregation would ultimately depend, in part, on the reaction of private citizens, as well as the actions of local school officials. In the end, the federal authorities empowered to employ their considerable policy tools to transform interracial contact found themselves in the position of squeezing a balloon: pressure in one place caused bulges to appear elsewhere. Some amount of change in interracial contact could be accomplished quickly and easily, some change was possible only with difficulty or only temporarily, and some change could not be accomplished at all.

The campaign for school desegregation—for many it was nothing less than a crusade—was launched by a judicial decision of extraordinary simplicity and moral clarity, and it soon received the backing of all three branches of the federal government. But it faced resistance in the country. Most obviously, it confronted an entire social system of racial separation in the American South, enforced by both the power of the state and informal intimidation, and elaborately codified in law, custom, and myth. The ferocity of the immediate reaction to the *Brown* decision made clear that the states of the former Confederacy, at least, would not stand idly by while an imperial federal government sought to destroy a central pillar of its social order. Nor was opposition confined to the South. Many whites outside the South had enjoyed privileged treatment in their public school systems as well. Public schools had been segregated by law in the District of Columbia and the six Border states (Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, Oklahoma, and West Virginia) as well as in parts of three other states (Arizona, Kansas, and New Mexico).<sup>17</sup> More significantly, public schools in much of the urban North were characterized by pronounced de facto segregation, owing to the highly fragmented jurisdictional landscape in most metropolitan areas. Thus, when later judicial decisions extended the logic of *Brown* to urban school dis-

## INTRODUCTION

tricts outside of the South, resistance to integration that had previously lain beneath the surface became increasingly evident.

Hence the execution of the policy of desegregation was frustrated, and ultimately blunted, by four factors: apparent white aversion to interracial contact, the multiplicity of means by which whites could sidestep the effects of the policy, the willingness of state and local governments to accommodate white resistance, and the faltering resolve of the prime movers of the policy. Apparent white aversion to interracial contact was widespread, and certainly not confined to the South, although it was most visible in that region. To be sure, it was neither universal nor uniform. Nor was it exclusive to whites, although it was surely more common in whites than among other major racial and ethnic groups. And it undoubtedly sprang from more than one source. For some, it surely grew out of pure racial antipathy. For others, however, it arose from inclinations common to most parents of any group: the desire to send children to well-appointed schools, staffed with skilled and experienced teachers, in safe neighborhoods, and with students from economically advantaged families. These preferences simply tended to correspond to a preference for schools with higher proportions of white students.<sup>18</sup> For the sake of understanding the decisions of white parents, the origin of the preference matters less than the preference itself.

The second factor frustrating desegregation was the multiplicity of escape routes open to many families wishing to reduce the level of interracial contact in their children's schools. Three main avoidance options existed. First, suburban school districts were the most obvious alternative to city school districts with high or rising proportions of minority students. Where they were conveniently located and predominantly white, these suburban districts offered a ready alternative to central city schools. They offered an especially ready option for newly formed households or families moving into a metropolitan area for the first time, because choosing to live there did not require the cost of an additional move. It turned out that these conditions differed markedly by region. In the Northeast and Midwest, it was not unusual for suburban school districts to be very small, so small that families moving into or living in some of the largest metropolitan areas in the country had dozens of school districts from which to choose. In the South and the West, however, school districts historically covered much larger areas, leaving families fewer districts from which to choose. A second avoidance option was, of course, private schools. Not for everyone, owing to their cost, private schools remained a safety valve for whites who were unhappy with the public

## INTRODUCTION

schools. Although there is good reason to believe that race was not the only or even primary reason why many parents sent their children to private school, the pertinent fact with respect to interracial contact is that, by and large, the private schools had smaller shares of minority students than the public schools. Extracurricular activities provided a third avoidance option, admittedly less effective than the first two. By participating in predominantly white activities in school and after school, whites could reduce their rate of contact with nonwhites.

The third factor that frustrated desegregation efforts was the willingness of state and local government officials—ranging from legislators who shaped state curricula to principals and counselors who determined classroom assignments—to accommodate white parents' wishes to minimize interracial contact. School officials in various parts of the country followed policies that had the effect of keeping schools racially identifiable. These included such well-documented practices as building new schools in predominantly white or nonwhite neighborhoods, adjusting school attendance boundaries to minimize racially mixed schools, and allowing whites to transfer out of racially changing schools. More important and longer lasting was the policy of academic tracking and other forms of ability grouping, which created racial disparities within schools. Other public policies not obviously related to education, including the creation of small local government jurisdictions and segregation of public housing projects, also had the effect of maintaining segregation in public schools whose attendance zones were based on residential neighborhoods.

Finally, desegregation efforts were constrained by faltering resolve on the part of the federal government and erstwhile proponents of integration. Beginning with the *Milliken* decision in 1974, the Supreme Court steadily backed away from its aggressive attack on racial imbalance. Limiting desegregation efforts to what could be accomplished within school districts necessarily left open the possibility that segregation caused by racial disparities between districts could continue to grow. In addition, federal courts, led by the Supreme Court, began to deem local school districts as “unitary” after they fulfilled certain requirements, thereafter allowing or mandating that they back away from explicit efforts to balance schools racially. Following *Milliken*, enthusiasm for integrated schools among spokespersons for minority groups visibly waned.

While acknowledging that these barriers reduced the impact of desegregation policies on the extent of interracial contact, we must not lose sight of the increases in interracial contact that did occur over this half-

## INTRODUCTION

century. The extent of change can be seen by tracing the trend in the percentage of black students attending schools that were 90–100 percent minority. This share went down sharply in the early 1970s, especially in the South, and then increased modestly, remaining well below where it stood in 1954. Interracial contact in school has also increased for whites. Today, most white students attend schools with some racial diversity, and in the South they attend schools whose numbers of black students could not have been imagined in 1954. To be sure, interracial friendships remain the exception rather than the rule, but the “loose ties” of association routinely bridge the color line. Thousands of integrated football and wrestling teams, bands, and school clubs give students in middle school and high school opportunities to know those from other racial and ethnic groups as individuals rather than as stereotypes. So, while school desegregation has been an imperfect revolution, falling far short of what some of its original proponents had dreamed it might have become, it has been a revolution nonetheless.

Yet these achievements are by no means secure. As the example of Winston-Salem / Forsyth illustrates emphatically, the process of desegregation is potentially reversible. Thus, after fifty years, it remains important to assess this policy, warts and all.

## OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

The book’s first chapter provides a brief historical narrative context for the study. It begins by describing official policies governing interracial contact in public schools on the eve of the *Brown* decision as well as other social forces affecting racial patterns of school enrollment. It then briefly summarizes the court decisions and other government actions relevant to school desegregation in the period. It also discusses differences in resources available in schools attended by students of different races.

Chapter 2 describes, using numeric indices, changes in interracial contact and segregation over the fifty-year period following the *Brown* decision. Focusing first on data for school districts, it extends backward to earlier years the trend analysis developed by Gary Orfield, using previously unpublished statistics from the 1950s and early 1960s collected from individual school districts, and other previously unutilized data. Together with newly calculated measures for more recent years, these calculations for earlier years provide the longest time series picture of

interracial contact in public schools so far available. The chapter then examines school desegregation measured for metropolitan areas. For the shorter 1970 to 2000 period, it decomposes segregation into three components and shows how each has changed over that period. Like most previous research on school segregation, the numerical analyses presented in the book focus on racial disparities in school enrollment. Owing to the paucity of relevant data, no attempt is made to measure segregation by social or economic class, nor is attention given to the distribution of teachers by race.

Chapter 3 discusses the connection between school desegregation and residential location. It considers, first, how residential patterns affect the segregation of schools. Second, it examines the effect of school desegregation on the residential choices of whites. In particular, it assesses the hypothesis that whites seek to avoid racially mixed schools. The chapter begins with a selective review of the previous research on this subject. It then presents two new empirical tests relevant to the question of what independent effect school desegregation has had on residential patterns. Finally, it considers the motivations that underlie white behavior.

Chapter 4 focuses on private schools and their role in school segregation. It begins by examining trends and patterns in private school enrollment. It then incorporates private school enrollment in a comprehensive decomposition of school segregation. Unlike conventional measures that are based on public schools in districts, this comprehensive approach accounts for both public and private students and groups students by metropolitan area rather than by district. Although they enroll only one-tenth of all K–12 students, private schools are sufficiently distinctive in terms of racial composition, in most communities, to contribute to overall racial segregation. How much they contribute to segregation is another question, and one that is examined in this chapter.

Almost all studies of school segregation have used school-level data, measuring segregation by looking at racial disparities among schools. Yet there is ample reason to pay attention to disparities that arise within schools, creating segregation across classrooms. Chapter 5 draws on research using otherwise unavailable data. First, it analyzes classroom-level data for North Carolina, which allows the measuring of segregation within schools as well as between them. Second, it discusses findings based on interracial contact in high school clubs and sports teams.

Chapter 6 is devoted exclusively to higher education. Using similar methodology on the unfamiliar application of colleges and universities, it develops measures to give a longitudinal perspective on interracial

## INTRODUCTION

contact, calculated at the campus level, for colleges that are roughly comparable to those used for elementary and secondary schools. The picture that emerges is one of tremendous change in previously white colleges and universities but remarkably little change in historically black institutions. Applying the conventional exposure and segregation measures at this level produces an unusual perspective from which to view developments in American higher education over the last several decades.

The last chapter summarizes the book's findings and assesses their importance for educational, social, and economic outcomes. Drawing from empirical research on the effects of interracial contact, it discusses the likely effect of the changes that have accompanied school desegregation. Finally, it notes policy questions related to interracial contact that remain pertinent as desegregation enters its second half-century.