

The History of Durham Schools, 1882-1929:

Learning from the Past

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The American education system is in crisis. You needn't look much farther than the recent movie "Waiting for Superman" to confirm this. One particular issue that the movie highlights is the observed disparity on a number of educational measures between the performance of groups of students, especially groups defined by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Many who recognized the disparity among schools in predominantly white versus predominantly African American neighborhoods believed that school choice could solve the issue by giving parents the option of sending their child to the public or private school of their choice (within their economic means). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was the government's attempt to narrow the achievement gap among demographic subgroups of K-12 students through standards-based education reform. Supporters of the Charter School Movement believe that charter schools, primary or secondary schools that receive public money but are not subject to some of the rules, regulations, and statutes that apply to other public schools in exchange for some type of accountability for producing certain results, which are set forth in each school's charter¹, are the answer.

The achievement gap among whites and African Americans is not a new issue in American education. It stems from the 1700's when the education of slaves was prohibited. Even after the KKK stopped going after teachers who dared educate the freedmen, tuition was a prohibitive factor for many African American families. In her book "Proud Shoes" Pauli Murray writes of a monthly fee imposed upon the parents of each child that wished to attend school around 1870.² The intent of the fee was to "make the freedmen more responsible," but the result was that many of the poorer children were forced to drop out.³ When public schooling was finally established in Durham, the gap

remained wide among white and colored schools. This issue was further compounded when graded schools were established in Durham in 1882,⁴ and a special tax funneled extra money into the white graded schools while the colored schools received minimal support from Durham County. This is oddly reminiscent of the current disparities between school districts caused by reliance on property taxes to fund schools. Wealthy, and often predominantly white, residential areas yield the highest tax revenue and thus provide the most funding of their school district, while poorer residential districts such as inner-cities cannot adequately finance their school district.

The issues facing our public schools today are a replaying of social/cultural/economic issues that American society has been struggling with since the beginning. As George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”⁵ Mapping past Durham schools in various layers of Google Earth allows us to visualize where schools were built and how the school system expanded over time. Documents detailing government apportions, illiteracy statistics and physical structure of the schools in Durham help form a more complete picture of the history of the Durham school system. Through studying the history of Durham schools between 1882 when the first graded school was built and 1929 when the Depression hit and school growth was put on hold, we can analyze the origin of issues still present in schools today and possibly find a remedy.

On April 10th, 1881 an Act providing for the establishment of a white graded school was ratified in the General Assembly and on September 4th, 1882 Durham’s first Graded School opened in Wright’s Factory, on West Main Street, with 308 pupils enrolled.⁶ In April 1886 the Supreme Court declared the Graded School Act

unconstitutional because of discrimination against the colored race, so on April 4th, 1887 Durham held a special election at which the amended Graded School Act was ratified by the people, and the first Colored Graded School was opened on Dandy Street in 1888.⁷ The Colored Graded School was destroyed in a fire soon after its construction, but it was re-built and remained in use until overcrowding forced the Graded School Board to move the school to a new building and location in 1896.⁸ By this time, a second white graded school, Morehead Graded School, had already been built to accommodate the increasing numbers of students.⁹ Disaster struck in 1899 and the Colored Graded School burned down yet again.¹⁰ This time it was rebuilt in a different location and re-named the Whitted School.¹¹ It was not until 1901 that the second colored graded school, the West End School, was built in the city of Durham.¹² By 1902, there were four white graded schools and only two colored graded schools and a pattern in school placement had begun to emerge with all but one white school above the railroad tracks and the colored schools below.¹³

The first white high school, City High School, was built in Durham in 1906.¹⁴ It was not until 1922, the same year that the new white high school was built to replace City High School, that the first colored high school, Hillside Park High School, was built.¹⁵ This was the only colored high school that would be built in Durham before 1929 even though a second white high school, East Durham High School, was built in 1926.¹⁶ The first junior high school, Carr Junior High School, was also built in Durham in 1926.¹⁷ Looking at the map of schools in Durham in 1929, the white graded schools are generally close to and above the railroad while the colored schools are either below the railroad or toward the outskirts of the city. There is also a concentration of white schools and not a

single colored school in the very center of Durham. This general pattern doesn't really reveal much until it overlaid with a residential security map of Durham from 1937. This map gave a grade A-D, with A being the best and D being the worst, to the various residential areas in Durham so insurance companies would know for which areas it was safe to give out housing loans. With the exception of Edgemont and Hickstown Graded Schools, every school located within a D-Grade residential district was a colored school, and the only colored school that was not in a D-Grade district was in a C-Grade district. Clearly, the pattern seen today of predominantly African American schools being located in the poorest residential districts has been around since the late 1800's.

It is also interesting to analyze the amount of money and resources put into schools in poor versus privileged residential districts in Durham between 1882 and 1929, which essentially means comparing the resources and values of colored versus white schools. In the Annual Report of the Public Schools of Durham County for the year July 1st, 1904 – June 30th, 1905, the value of building, library and grounds, including school furniture, for white schools was listed as \$25,950.00.¹⁸ The corresponding value of the colored schools was only \$4,350.00.¹⁹ There were 2,149 white students enrolled in school compared to 1,109 colored students, but despite the fact that there were only twice as many white students the county spent almost six times as much money on the white schools.²⁰ There was also a huge disparity between teachers' salaries in the white versus colored schools as the average salary of teachers per month in the white schools was \$35.00, while it was only \$20.00 in the colored schools.²¹ The average monthly salary of teachers in the white schools gradually rose over the years, but the salary of the teachers in the colored school didn't change until the \$1 raise they received during the 1907-1908

school year.²² By the 1909-10 school year, the value of buildings, libraries and grounds, including school furniture, had risen to \$65,400.00 in the white schools and \$7,175.00 in the colored schools.²³ This meant that Durham county had spent more than nine times the amount of money on the white schools as compared to the colored schools even though there were still only about two times as many white students as colored students.²⁴ The difference in white versus colored school teacher salary had also grown, as the average monthly teacher salary in the white and colored schools had changed to \$46.00 and \$25.50, respectively.²⁵

A 1913 booklet of “Salaries, Apportionments and Notes of Committeemen” in Durham reveals another area in which there was a huge disparity among white and colored schools – apportionments.²⁶ Apportionment is defined as the distribution of funds for local educational agencies in support of the public school system. In the white schools, the 1913 apportionment for schools ranged from \$62 to \$1,500.²⁷ Many of the white schools were also labeled as having a “special tax” which was collected from the families of students and helped raise additional funds for the school.²⁸ In the colored schools the highest apportionment for a school was \$200, and some schools received only \$80.²⁹ In 1918, the range of apportionment was between \$200 and \$4,250 for white schools and between \$90 and \$250 for colored schools.³⁰ Not only did Durham County spend more to build the white schools, but they funneled more money into the white schools every year after.

One more obvious difference between the white and colored schools was the student to teacher ratio. In 1910, there were 54 teachers and 2,339 students enrolled in the white schools so the student to teacher ratio was approximately 43 to one.³¹ In the

colored schools there were 18 teachers and 1,236 students enrolled resulting in a 69 to one student to teacher ratio.³²

The effect of such inequities revealed itself in the illiteracy rates of white and colored Durham residents. The Durham County School Bulletin from September 30, 1915 included census data revealing that of the 3791 whites in Durham, 62 fit into the category of “illiterates (12-21)” and 210 were “adult illiterates.”³³ Despite the fact that there were about half as many colored people in Durham, there were almost three times as many “illiterates (12-21)” and five times as many “adult illiterates.”³⁴

As James Leloudis says in his book “Schooling in the New South,” the period from 1880 through the mid-1920s, was a critical juncture in southern history when reformers labored to make a New South through the agency of public education.³⁵ They looked to the classroom to induct future generations into the habits of wage labor and market production and relied on schooling to discipline race relations in a world of hardening segregation and black disfranchisement.³⁶ Today, more than a century later, we still wrestle with the legacies of their labor.³⁷ So the question remains what to do to narrow and eventually close the achievement gap. In examining the history of schools in Durham between 1882 and 1929 it becomes clear that the gap is man-made, which means that we also have the power to eliminate it. But simple reforms of the current education system will not be enough to achieve this goal. Because the achievement gap is a result of the way our school system was initially designed, the school system needs to be completely re-designed. The disparity among schools as a result of over-dependence of schools on property taxes needs to be addressed, as does the issue of over-crowding of schools and high student to teacher ratio. These are issues that originated all the way

back in the 1800s. If we don't learn from the past we are doomed to continue repeating it, but if we do we have the power to make a difference in the field of education.

Notes

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