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As Our Students Watched

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ARTICLE

As our Students Watched

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"A spirit of harmony can only survive if each of us remembers, when bitterness and self-interest seem to prevail, that we share a common destiny."

-Barbara Jordan

In April, 2002, a three judge panel of the U.S. 9th Circuit Court handed down a ruling that overturned the Seattle School District's use of a school choice tie-breaker process based on race when assigning students to its high schools. This tie-breaker process was in place to support the school district's commitment to the racial integration of its high schools. The Seattle School District put this process in place as part of its response to earlier mandates (e.g. Brown vs. Board of Education) for the desegregation of public schools. This remedy was intended to support a commitment to creating and sustaining diverse high school student populations while simultaneously addressing the overarching mandate to desegregate public schools.

This tie-breaker process was effectively serving to create more diverse student populations in Seattle's high schools until April, 2002. This is where I became involved with this issue. I had been named the new principal of Ballard High School for the 2000-2001 school year. I had served as a high school principal in a neighboring district previous to my move to Ballard High School and the Seattle Public Schools. I lived in the Ballard neighborhood. My move to Ballard High School was a dream come true. I was taking on the leadership of a dynamic, forward-thinking staff situated in a supportive school community. Additionally, Ballard High School was a brand new, state of the art facility having been re-inhabited in the 1999-2000 school year. All within walking distance of my home! I felt like I was the most privileged and fortunate of educators in Seattle.

Of course, I was aware that there was a citizens' group challenging Seattle's student assignment process when I accepted my new position. Significantly, the school directly involved in this challenge was Ballard High School. This group of white parents felt that it was unfair that their children were being denied assignment to Ballard High School because of the application of the racial tie-breaker process. Because Ballard High School was a brand new facility with an attractive educational program, it reached its enrollment capacity quickly. The racial tie-breaker process was in operation when I moved students from the lengthy waiting list for Ballard High School. This groups' challenge was working its way through the legal system during my first year at Ballard High School.

Over the course of my first year as Ballard's new principal, I was learning a great deal about my students, teachers and support staff through a variety of activities. In the formal and informal student focus groups I facilitated, I frequently heard references made of the value of having a diverse student population. Even when I pointed out evidence of conflict generated out of this diversity; my students insisted on the value of having a chance to reach resolution within the context of their differences. I quickly learned that my students saw this process of integration as a compelling educational condition for relevant, practical learning. There was little doubt about the value of this learning to my students. That much was very clear to me!

I learned to invert the all too frequent perception that minority students were the main beneficiaries of this integration process. In fact, it seemed to me that the benefit of this integration process to my majority white students exceeded any possible benefit to my minority students in terms of new

learning. While many of my parents found this inversion of perception troubling initially, they soon came to realize that it was, in fact, the case with their children. I knew that having a diverse student population at Ballard High School was one of the school's most compelling educational attributes by the time the 9th Circuit Court's first ruling on Seattle's assignment policy was announced in April of 2002. At that point, my school was Exhibit A in a very important struggle.

That week in April of 2002 was an agonizing week of decision for me. Once I moved beyond the "Why me and my school?" lamentations, I began asking myself how committed was I to challenging this court decision publicly? I understood that a lot was at stake with this issue. I had lived through the slow erosion of public support for school integration. I had witnessed the slow 'triumph' of white privilege as parents moved away from urban schools to move 'comfortable' school systems. White flight certainly had left its mark on Seattle's educational landscape. It struck me that much of this change had occurred unchallenged, even uncommented upon in the public arena. In this I could see the power of silence.

In the end, I decided to speak out against this court decision as dramatically and as demonstrably as possible. While not relishing my new role as a public dissident, I was strengthened by the sure knowledge that I was speaking out for my students and their belief in the value of integration. I set a course to raise and extend the public conversation about the value of school integration and the subsequent educational richness a diverse student population created. For many people, the sight of a privileged, white school leader defying a court decision was extremely unsettling. I suppose it came as a surprise after years of quiet acquiescence to the general trend toward re-segregation of our schools. For sure, the lines of the arguments regarding school integration were becoming increasingly visible:

Do public school systems have the authority to constitute themselves so that long-standing inequities can be addressed and resolved?

Do public school systems have the authority to support and defend the compelling educational interests derived from having diverse student populations?

As Jonathan Kozol points out in his book [The Shame of the Nation](#), these are questions that merit deep public discussion. Rather than acquiesce quietly to the re-segregation of our public schools, we should have a robust conversation about whether integration matters to us in our communities and our nation. I was determined to assist that public conversation to the extent my means permitted me to do so. As it turned out, the conversation about the questions listed above extended over a period of years! As a result, the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to revisit this great national conversation in their fall 2006 session. This both encourages and disheartens me. I'm encouraged because the conversation remains alive and charged with meaning at the highest level. I'm disheartened by the possibility of a Supreme Court decision that would lend support to the grim process so passionately described in Kozol's [The Shame of the Nation](#).

After several years' absence from being a high school principal, I've returned to that role in a new school in a different school district. My school is a wonderful mix of students. Every year I've been a principal I've convened a focus group of returning alumni during the mid-winter break season to get their feedback about how well prepared they were for their next steps in life. I collect their feedback and share it with my staff for our collective learning. The frequent comments from my alumni about the value of their experience of diversity at Squalicum High School and how it prepared them for success in their lives beyond high school confirms for me the truth that a diverse student population has a powerful educational benefit not readily measured in test results; but very real, nonetheless! Additionally, these comments confirm for me the premise that those who benefit most from a diverse student population are those of the majority. This is certainly the case at Squalicum High School!

Finally, as I await the Supreme Court's decision regarding Seattle's student assignment policy, I wonder about our national commitment to integration in a general sense. Do we see integration as a desirable social goal? Do we believe public policy should support integration? Will we resolve our differences through the exercise of privilege or through a broader sense of destiny based on principles of equity? My friend Jonathan Kozol has continued to ask all of us a central question over the course of his life's work. ***In the end, how will we serve our children?***