book reviews

Whatever Happened to Integration?

Reviving the ideal of the common school

Five Miles Away, A World Apart: One City, Two Schools, and the Story of Educational Opportunity in Modern America

By James E. Ryan

Oxford University Press, 2010, $29.95; 384 pages.

As reviewed by Nathan Glazer

The two schools referred to in the title of this book are Thomas Jefferson (“Tee-Jay”) High School in Richmond, Virginia, and Freeman High School, in suburban Henrico County. They show the contrasts we would expect between a high school in an urban and predominantly black school district, and one in a suburban, predominantly white, and middle-class county. But these schools do not play the central role in this book: they make intermittent appearances, illustrating a very detailed account of how legal efforts have failed in the 56 years since the historic Brown decision to overcome the effects of the segregation of black and poor students.

The overall verdict of the author, a professor of law at the University of Virginia, is that these efforts have failed primarily because we have not been able to bring together urban and suburban school districts to reduce the concentrations of black students. His plea for greater integration as the road to improving educational outcomes for poor and black students closely echoes that recently made by Gerald Grant in his Hope and Despair in the American City: Why there are no bad schools in Raleigh (see “Tale of Two Cities,” book review, Spring 2010). This may well be true, but it is surprising to see such strong advocacy for the racial integration of schools at a time when the prospects for any public action—executive, legislative, or judicial—to combine for purposes of integrating urban and suburban school districts are just about nonexistent.

None of the other legal approaches show much promise, Ryan argues. He reviews the complex tangle of legal efforts to increase state support for urban schools, by way of litigation based on state constitutions. This followed another Supreme Court check to federal action to equalize or increase support to urban schools. Little has been accomplished after decades of litigation and much admonition of state legislatures by state supreme courts. Nor is Ryan optimistic that the problem would have been ameliorated if these efforts had been more successful: “Tee-Jay” already spends in excess of $4,000 more per student than Freeman, with worse results. And he refers to the enormous increase in expenditures for Kansas City schools in the wake of a desegregation suit, and its limited results (see my review of Complex Justice by Joshua M. Dunn, “Finding the Right Remedy,” book review, Spring 2009).

Increased expenditure, Ryan argues, is a poor substitute for integration: It “take[s] as given—either as a matter of strategy or necessity—that poor and minority districts will remain separate from white and wealthier ones.... [It] channel[s] resources to poor struggling districts, which are usually in urban or rural areas, while protecting the independence and sanctity of wealthy districts, which are usually in suburbs. Save the cities, and spare the suburbs.” Ryan again and again argues that the suburban middle class has been able to protect its schools from what it sees as the threat of integration.

Ryan is more positive about the varieties of school choice—whether within school districts, or by way of charter schools and vouchers, and of course he favors interdistrict choice—but the legislative and judicial obstacles (not to mention practical ones) to the expansion of this route are clear. Nor is Ryan optimistic about the impact of the standards and testing movement, primarily because the bars have been set too low, which means that the urban schools, placing all their efforts into passing, manage to do so, while the suburban schools easily surpass the state’s yardsticks. So “Tee-Jay” does not look so bad when tested by Virginia’s standards, but Freeman pays the state standard little mind, as its students go on further to AP courses and tests: “A reform that might have tied urban and suburban schools together has been transformed into yet another one that reinforces the gap that separates them. Standards and
testing promise, essentially, that urban students will learn the basics. Meanwhile, the suburban students, while not immune from standards and testing, are certainly not limited by them.”

Ryan argues for integration not only because he believes it will improve educational outcomes for black students, but also because of his commitment to the ideal of the common school, which promises to bring together Americans of all economic circumstances, and all races and groups. Ryan is distressed that this hope seems to play so small a role in our politics and public discussion. “In Search of Ties That Bind” is the title of his penultimate chapter, in which he explores the possibilities of integration in the current bleak situation. He is aware that “it is unfashionable these days to talk seriously about ways to increase racial and socioeconomic integration. The goal seems not only impossible but also increasingly beside the point…. To talk about integration is to talk about a relic from the past or a distracting frill.”

In this situation, he places his hopes for integration on the varieties of free choice and, seeking signs that we may yet become a more integrated society, finds some promise. The proportion of minorities in the population is increasing, which inevitably means more minorities in predominately white schools. More blacks are moving to suburbs (as increasingly are other minorities, e.g., Asian and Hispanic), and more whites are returning to (some) cities. We should not exaggerate the significance of these moves: minorities do not share the same interests and ideals in schooling, and even the least advantaged ones, blacks and Hispanic Americans, may not look on their situations the same way. And the movement of blacks into suburbs very often re-creates the economically struggling neighborhoods they have left in the cities. Nevertheless, it is promising to note that “Tee-Jay” has a substantial white minority student body (16 percent), while Freeman has a sizable black minority (13 percent). That still makes them black and white schools, but this is quite different from the 100 percent black and white schools of 1954, and for many years after. Ryan is encouraged by the example of Montclair, New Jersey, and some other municipalities in maintaining integrated communities over time, and by the longtime maintenance of METCO in the Boston area, and hopes that further interdistrict programs might be launched.

One cannot be too optimistic about the reach of these developments that are increasing integration: they are operating slowly. In the end, is there any escape from the reality that the improvement of educational outcomes for a large section of the black population will have to take place, if it is to come about at all, in schools with a black majority?

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“Take out your phones. Open the American History app and turn to the page about George Washington.”