

PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART



James S. Coleman: Education's North Star

A STAR HAS AT LEAST FIVE POINTS. So I was told by a senior colleague at a time in my life when I was desperately trying to figure out how to burnish just one. Even by that standard, James S. Coleman is securely situated in a celestial constellation, as five points can be discerned even if one looks only at his research on schools.

Above all, he was the senior author of “Equality of Educational Opportunity” (EEO), the report mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education. Expected to show that African Americans were isolated in inferior schools, the study found that school resources varied mainly by region, not by their racial composition. Student achievement did not depend on the money spent and only marginally on the experience of teachers (see essays by Eric Hanushek and Dan Goldhaber). It was the education of the parents and other family background characteristics that counted most (see essay by Anna Egalite). The most important thing about a school was the peer group. Blacks did better if they went to school with whites, and the achievement of whites did not decline in integrated classrooms. The Lyndon Johnson administration, unhappy with many of the findings, first tried to bury the report but then realized that no one had made a better case for school desegregation.

Though only 38 years of age when the EEO study began, Coleman already had a commanding reputation. In his landmark work, *The Adolescent Society* (1961), he reported that most high-school students were disengaged from their studies and resented their teachers. Cheerleaders and football stars were honored, because they brought credit to the school. Studious nerds were socially isolated for raising the grading curve for everyone else.

To fix the system, Coleman proposed academic games in which teams of students competed against those at other schools. Though this point did not shine in Coleman’s lifetime, modern technologies are now creating the opportunities to bring the idea to fruition (see essay by Greg Toppo).

After EEO, Coleman took up new, even more controversial topics. When he showed that white flight to suburbia accelerated in the wake of central-city desegregation, the president of the American Sociological Association called for his censure or expulsion from the association for spreading “flammable

propaganda.” Coleman barely avoided expulsion, but today few dispute his findings (see essay by Steven Rivkin).

Coleman became the North Star of the school choice movement when he reported that students, especially those of minority background, performed at a higher level if they attended Catholic schools. “Catholic schools benefit from a network of social relations, characterized by trust, that constitute a form of ‘social capital,’” he said. “Beyond the family is social capital . . . provided by the religious community surrounding a Catholic school . . . that has value for a young person’s development. . . . It resides in the functional community, the actual social relationships that exist among parents.”

With the release of this report, Coleman had done an about-face: schools could in fact make a difference, he now said. But it was the school’s culture, not its material qualities, that counted. Once again, critics expressed outrage. “The report is inconsistent with the notion of disciplined inquiry,” fumed one Harvard faculty member. *The New York Times* complained that “sociologists invite trouble” when they seek “the stardom of advocacy based on their fallible predictions.” Coleman nonetheless jump-started a school choice movement that has grown in substance and significance over the ensuing decades (see essay by Martin West).

All five Coleman studies, products of their day, had their methodological limitations (see essay by Caroline Hoxby). But for half a century, Coleman’s work has altered the shape of education research, school politics, and school policy (see essays by Sally Kilgore and Tom Kane). The time has come for a balanced assessment of its lasting significance.

Paul E. Peterson

By James S. Coleman: *The Adolescent Society* (1961) ★ “Equality of Educational Opportunity” (1966) ★ “Academic Games and Learning” (1968) ★ “Trends in School Segregation, 1968-73” (1975) ★ *High School Achievement* (1982)

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
