

Crisis in the Schools

Decentralization and Racism

Nancy Kahn

1970

In August of 1969, the Michigan State Legislature passed Public Act 244, designed to “decentralize” the Detroit school system. The act (a watered down version of the original bill submitted by Sen. Coleman Young) called for a new division of Detroit city schools into 7 to 11 school districts, each of which would be run by a locally elected regional board. On the surface, the act appeared to provide a way of giving people in each community a much greater say in the way in which their schools would be run.

However, if you read the act carefully, you will find that it does not give any real power to the regional boards. The nomination of members of the regional board, the employment of a superintendent and teachers, the determination of a curriculum and budget are all subject to “guidelines established by the first class school board” (the present central Board of Education). The School Board also retains control of purchasing, payroll, contract negotiations, property management and maintenance, bonding, special education programs, and allocation of funds for capital outlay in each district. Act 244 merely decentralized the bureaucracy; it didn’t give any powers to the regional boards.

Decentralization met with an angry response as people in both the Black and white community realized that the act was a farce—it does not give community people power or control over their own schools, since the central Board of Education can reverse any decisions made by the regional boards. Decentralization is clearly an effort to appease the violent dissatisfaction expressed by people all over Detroit with the poor quality of education provided by the Detroit school system.

It takes the focus of blame off the central Board of Education and is designed to channel people’s complaints in the direction of the new district school boards. Black students have waged a long struggle to gain power in their schools? the School Board clearly wants to get them off its back. However, most of the Black Community and some of the white community support decentralization as it could begin to provide a way for community people to struggle for real control of their schools.

The decentralization bill did not specify where the boundaries of the new school districts were to be located. The controversy which has been raging since last August centers around the placement of the new boundaries. Boundaries are very important. The best way to insure community participation is to develop new school districts which follow the lines of natural neighborhoods which have developed in Detroit. This would force the decentralized boards to be responsible to the educational needs of people with similar interests who live in each community in the city.

In March, the Board of Education held three community meetings to discuss various plans for decentralization. Members of the West Central Organization attended the meetings and advocated the “Black Plan” (see map) developed by Parents and Students for Community Control (an alliance of the West Central Organization, the city-wide Black Student United Front, and 20 other Black Community based groups). The Black Plan groups predominantly black schools together: and predominantly white schools together.



This puts the largest number of black students under the control of black voters and the largest number of white students under the control of white voters.

For example, Osborn, Denby, and Finney (predominantly white) are in one constellation, while North-eastern, Murray Wright, Western and Southwestern (predominantly black) are in another constellation. Because this plan permits black voters to elect regional boards for black schools, the Black Plan is the only plan which gives Black people a way of avoiding the oppression and powerlessness which they have experienced under the old School Board. The Black Plan is clearly the plan most sympathetic to the educational needs of Black people. (Keep in mind that white people already have control of their own schools as well as control over the kind of education received by Black children.) Unfortunately, the Black Plan leaves white children under the control of their white parents, most of whom are racists. Under this plan, white students would continue to be indoctrinated in the racist ideology of Amerika unless they got together to fight for a non-racist education for themselves.

At all three community meetings, both blacks and whites expressed overwhelming support for the Black Plan. Despite the wishes of people in Detroit, the Board of Education adopted plan B2, which decentralizes the school districts into fully integrated high school units, by changing the junior high feeder patterns which feed into the high schools.

Demonstrations immediately broke out. At Osborn High School, 15 year old Black girls were beaten by racist white students from Denby High who were protesting any form of integration with Black students. Black students at Barbour Junior High walked out in protest of having to integrate with racist white students at Denby. Several other demonstrations occurred throughout the city.

The Board of Education claims that full integration is the only way to give quality education to all the students in the Detroit schools. In fact, however, the School Board's plan B2 is the most racist plan of all. It creates districts which lump white racist voter areas with Black voter areas. Regions have been "gerrymandered" by including at least one very strong white voter area with one not quite so strong Black

voter area in such a way that the white voters outnumber the Black ones. Thus, under the plan, white people control the education of Black children in all but one district—the same white people who have clearly demonstrated their racist hatred for Blacks!

B2 even puts white racist areas in control over integrated schools! For instance, Redford (97% white) controls Cooley (41% white). The School Board has used “integration” as an excuse for having white people control Black schools. “Integration” has become a front for maintaining the white supremacy which has always existed in the Detroit schools.

Because of the uproar which greeted B2, decentralization will probably be repealed by the state legislature. People blame decentralization for the new — integration plan. This is very unfortunate; the Black Plan for decentralization would have opened the way for Black people to control their own education. Decentralization is not at fault, but rather, the plan that the School Board chose to select.

The value of the Decentralization Bill lay in the possibility that a good decentralization plan could open a way for Black people to struggle for real community control of their schools. For white people to understand why this is important, it is necessary for us to understand why Black people must and should have control of the schools in their communities. Last November, the Webber Community-Council issued a statement which sums up the feeling of many Black people toward the education which they have received in white Amerika:

“While all of us, black and white, should be working toward the same thing, we are not. It appears we are striving for several different things. The Board’s concern seems to be maintaining white control (known by us as white supremacy) under the guise of integration. Our concern is with quality education for our children. With the school system under white control this does not seem to have mattered. School systems have operated for the good of white students and the detriment of black students. Our education under white control has changed us from a people who were the builders of great nations into a people who are poorly educated and cannot produce decent men and women from under-educated, miseducated, and non-educated sons and daughters.

“Our education under white control has caused us to progress very little academically from the days when our sons played in the streets as little boys until they worked in the factories as men. We know this need not be. We know our history of denial due to legal and illegal slavery all too well. We know, as The old folks said, that book learning is one of the most important tools of a free people. And we know we can do no worse than is being done by the present system, which continues to graduate from our high schools hard-core unemployed and Vietnam cannon fodder.”

Last week, students at Cooley High demonstrated at the reinstatement of Abe Eliowitz, a physical education teacher who was removed from Cooley for hitting a student in the face and knocking him down. The Board of Education decided to let Eliowitz return to Cooley, despite the protests of the Cooley Community Council. Eliowitz is a typical example of the type of racist who is presently encouraged to remain as a teacher in Black schools. The flagrant refusal by the School Board to heed the wishes of people in the Cooley community, is the most recent example of the need for community control. Without it, the Black Community has no way to rid itself of such teachers.

It is important for all of us to understand what “community control” means. In the case of schools, it is the only way to give parents and students in each community or district primary power in deciding how schools should be run. It would force the administration and personnel of each-School to be responsive to the educational needs of people in the community as they would be made directly responsible to a district board representing the needs and interests of the people within each community. Curriculums would be arrived at cooperatively by school personnel, community representatives and students.

The box on the right [below in this online version] contains the resolutions passed by those who attended the conference on decentralization and community control sponsored by the West Central Organization last December. The resolutions present a clear alternative to the reactionary and racist education which Black people have received in the Detroit schools. They offer a guideline for community control which would give Black people real power over the schools in their communities.

Parents and Students for Community Control will continue the fight for community control of schools even if the decentralization act is repealed. They plan to open up offices in each of the constellations outlined in the Black Plan. At present, they have opened up offices in three areas of the city. The main office at 8534 Grand River (895-2300) will service people in the Northwestern, McKenzie and Cody areas. Call this office to find out when and where the office in your neighborhood will be opening. The West Central Organization at 3354 Grand River (831-5252; 831-5253) will be working with parents and students in the area covered by Northeastern, Murray Wright, Western, and Southwestern high schools. UNICOMM (United Community Movement) located at 8719 Puritain (863-5353) will be fighting for community control along with parents and students from Mumford and Cooley high schools.

White students who wish to follow the lead of their Black brothers by demanding an end to the racist education that exists in white schools, should contact the Parents and Students office in their neighborhood. Call the main office (895-2300) to find out when the office in your neighborhood will open. Community control is the only way for American education to serve its people, both black and white. It forces educators to be directly responsible to the needs of people in each community and opens the way for developing a non-racist educational system which will make it possible for a real and meaningful integration to take place.

What Black Control of the Schools Means

Below are a summary of Resolutions on decentralization and Community Control passed by the West Central Organization and other Black Community groups:

1. Since the ideology of the public schools stresses competition, dog-eat-dog values, and serves to perpetuate the materialistic, imperialistic, economic system which has historically suppressed black people, be it resolved that the ideology of the public schools be altered to reflect cooperation, sharing, non-materialism, humanitarian values.
2. Many teachers in the schools reflect the racist attitudes of the general society, and these attitudes reflected in their behavior serve to psychologically murder black children and are detrimental to the goals, achievements, and aspirations of black students, be it resolved that teachers be selected and evaluated on the basis that they possess positive attitudes toward black youth, believe in their dignity, worth and intelligence, and teach students on this basis.
3. The students and community must be involved in evaluation and review of administrators and teachers. Merit pay and salary increments should be awarded on the basis of performance in the school and community. Teachers found to be incompetent and detrimental to the black community should be removed by powers allocated to the regional board.
4. Under the current system, money is allocated and contracts awarded by the Central board, irregardless of community need or racist union practices. Be it resolved that monies be allocated according to priorities established by the regional boards and that all construction and maintenance contracts be awarded as decided upon by the regional boards.
5. The middle class white oriented curriculum both historically and presently serves to program students into slots to maintain the economic system which suppresses black people, and this curriculum stifles political awareness and activity, creativity, group cohesiveness, and race pride. Be it resolved that these curriculums be restructured through agencies created by the regional board. Curriculums must be relevant to the black community and designed for survival. Students and community people should participate in the development of new curriculums.

6. It has been proven without question that the presence of police, uniformed or in plain clothes, private or public, are psychologically detrimental and drastically interfere with the learning process. They are a source of intimidation leading to unnecessary disruption. Be it resolved that all police', uniformed, ununiformed, private and public be immediately removed from all schools.
7. Teachers must live in Detroit and preferably in the region in which they teach.
8. Segregation has been proven to be detrimental only where teacher attitudes are biased. It has been proven that integration does not help students when biased attitudes prevail. Be it resolved that integration not be an objective of any regional boundaries nor the main thrust of this conference in regards to regional guidelines.
9. The present testing program of the Detroit Public Schools discriminates against black youth due to the fact that it is based on white middle-class values and culture. Test results further perpetuate low expectations of teachers, administrators, and students. They are used to program students into menial occupations and do not reflect the actual abilities of black students. Be it resolved that the present testing program be abolished and reoriented by the regional boards to serve the actual needs of black students and the black community.
10. The community is not fully aware of all the aspects of decentralization and community control. Be it resolved that a follow-up mechanism be instituted to insure that the community will be educated and informed of all things effecting education, and will be organized to struggle for community control of schools leading to quality education.
11. Black students engaged in protest activities such as demonstrations, distribution of literature, the display of the Black Nationalist flag and related symbols of Black unity, have been expelled or suspended for such activities. Be it resolved that:
 1. These students be reinstated immediately.
 2. Any indication of these suspensions and expulsions be stricken from the records of these students.
1. The physical facilities in the "inner-city" are inadequate. Be it "resolved that a committee of students, parents and professionals be formed to plan the most appropriate use of present buildings for a new educational model, design new schools, and consider the effects of heat, fresh air, flexible scheduling, small groups, community involvement, etc.
2. There is a central student organization to deal with student problems. Be it resolved that there be support of the Black Student United Front. The purpose of the "Front" is to correlate student energies into a constructive force that will bring about positive change in the educational system. A city-wide student paper should be circulated throughout the city and published by the B.S.U.F. This paper will educate the masses as to individual gains, strategies and philosophies of different schools, emphasizing the need for change.
3. Black students have been continually denied their constitutional rights of freedom of speech and assembly. Be it resolved that students have the right to express themselves through publications and speech, the distribution of literature; and organization free of censorship. Students have the right to assemble freely and to invite outside speakers, irregardless of their political views, to address them.
4. The American Federation of Teachers, Detroit Federation of Teachers and National Association of Education, have proven themselves guilty of creating apathy amongst Black teachers by their push for purely labor ends in education, i.e. shorter work weeks, higher salaries and so-called police protection. They maintain a bastion of racism in order to attempt to overpower and cow the black community into continued submission. Be it resolved that the regional board and the black community recognize

the existing D.F.T., A.F.T., and N.A.E. as implacable foes and set up safeguards against them, providing alternative Black Teachers Unions open to Students and community members.

fifth Estate

Nancy Kahn
Crisis in the Schools
Decentralization and Racism
1970

<https://www.fiftheestate.org/archive/104-april-30-may-13-1970/crisis-in-the-schools>
Fifth Estate #104, April 30-May 13, 1970

fiftheestate.anarchistlibraries.net