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City Making

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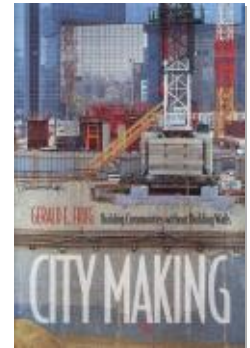
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Education

The “Public” Aspect of Education

“Education,” the Supreme Court declared in *Brown v. Board of Education*, “is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments,” but these days many people find it hard to understand why. The reason is that education is also perhaps the most important consumer good that people ever acquire, not only for themselves but also for their children. Education is considered the road to advancement, for the poor as well as the rich: the better the education, the better the job and, as a result, the better the quality of life. Parents thus think it essential for their children to go to a school that offers “academic excellence.” Many parents shop for such a school by deciding where to live on the basis of the quality of the public schools. Others want to go further, arguing that there is no justification for making local governments the primary vehicles for running the schools. Instead, they say, everyone should have access to academic excellence wherever it is found, whether in public or private schools, paid for with vouchers or in some other way. This search for a high quality education is not surprising given the widespread anxiety about the kind of competitive world today’s children are destined to enter. The problem with it is not the demand for excellence—itself a worthy goal—but the fact that it includes no vision of the public nature of education. Education simply becomes a product everyone acquires individually, with each family trying to obtain the very best product it can get.¹

From its inception, however, public education has not merely been a market commodity parents provide their children. It has also had a social function. In school, as John Dewey put it, “each individual gets an opportunity to escape from the limitations of the social group in which he was born, and to come into living contact with a broader environment.” It is there, Dewey continued, that individuals are introduced to a perspective broad enough to encompass the “different races, differing religions, and unlike customs” that constitute American life. This educational experience affects more than the ways that individuals think about the world. It is a primary vehicle for the reproduction of American society itself. Schools, the founders of American public education recognized, are the “public’s agencies for creating and re-creating publics.” Parents obviously

have, and should have, a major influence on their children's education. But everyone else in the community has a stake in the educational process as well.²

The idea that education is, in part, a process of socialization by the state has always been controversial. It therefore has traditionally been defended by an appeal to values thought to be above controversy. A common republicanism, a common Protestantism, assimilation to American norms, universal ideas of merit and excellence, consensus values, the need to prepare citizens to engage in democratic decision making—ideas like these have justified, or sought to justify, public education for more than 150 years. These days, however, no rationale for government-sponsored socialization seems uncontroversial. The meaning of the term “public,” when used as a modifier to describe the nation's schools, has thus become hard to decipher.³

Community building—the justification I offer for public schools—is controversial as well. Its usefulness lies not in its universal acceptance but in its focus on a central issue: one way or another, the nation's schools prepare children for living in our diverse society. What is controversial is how we should prepare them to do so. As I describe below, the American education system now largely responds to diversity by creating boundaries, intellectual and social as well as geographic, that separate children along lines of race, class, and ethnicity. By relying on school district lines to define school populations and on the tracked curriculum to organize individual schools, it helps divide Americans into groups that are increasingly incomprehensible to each other. Many—although by no means all—school choice proposals would simply intensify this process. A public school system organized to promote community building, by contrast, could have the opposite effect by giving a particular content both to the word “public” and to the word “education.” From my perspective, a school is not public simply because it is operated by the government. Even a school run by a city can be organized like a voluntary association, with school district boundaries, rather than admissions officers, defining who fits in. I consider a school public if it is open to the heterogeneity of American life and, as a result, enables its students to engage different types of people not simply in the curriculum but also in the classroom. As so defined, a public school influences the education students receive. Education has always been more than the transfer of nuggets of knowledge from teacher to student. Learning how to get along with one's peers is a central feature of the hidden curriculum of every school system, one as important as excellence in determining how well schools prepare their students for their future careers. Yet when a national commission on education told the country in 1983 that the deteriorating quality of the public education system had put the nation at risk, it focused only on the formal curriculum.

In my view, the same should have been said about the national need to improve our individual and collective capacity to get along with the kind of people who populate America's metropolitan areas, whoever they are.⁴

This conception of community building is based on, but modifies, the attempts in recent decades to reverse the divisive impact fostered by the predominant organization of American education. Since the 1950s, efforts to integrate the schools and to make school funding more equal have, in fact, become the principal vehicle for governmental efforts to reduce the fragmentation of American society. This oppositional policy, however, has faced two formidable obstacles that it has been unable to overcome. First of all, it has placed on education too great a share of the burden of combating racial and ethnic intolerance. Indeed, its success has been undermined by city, state, and federal policies on other matters that have worked in the opposite direction. For example, racial integration of the public schools has routinely been understood as an attack on the neighborhood school, but the neighborhoods themselves have been organized, through zoning and other government policies, in a way that has divided them into racially identifiable spaces. It is not surprising, therefore, that the adults who lived in areas understood as separate from—even hostile to—outsiders would be opposed to breaking barriers for their children that they were unwilling to break for themselves. The defense of the neighborhood school, after all, has always been a defense of the neighborhood as well as of the school. The same point can be made about crime policy. Fear of violence is one of the issues much in the minds of parents who are anxious about diversity in the public schools. But, as I argue in the next chapter, the principal way that parents have dealt with this fear for themselves is to isolate themselves from it. If so, it would be odd if they were willing to expose their children to the kind of violence that they have tried so hard to escape. Education, then, cannot be the central focus for solving urban problems. Community building has to be a strategy for organizing all city functions.

Recent efforts to diversify the public schools have also been hampered by being seen as a form of coercion (“forced busing”). This coercive element has been highlighted by the fact that integration was originally ordered by the courts: without judicial activism, it seemed, children would go to the school they “naturally” would go to—that is, their neighborhood school. These days, however, the school choice movement has made it clear that the neighborhood school itself is a form of coercion. Why should a child be forced to go to a neighborhood school rather than another one that seems better? By capitalizing on Americans' romance with the word “choice,” proponents of school choice have made it seem even more natural than a neighborhood. Yet school choice is not natural either. Like the definition of a neighborhood for school attendance purposes, the

mechanism that structures how parents' choices are made is a product of the legal system. No one proposes that the legal system treat education like a conventional market good. Defenders of school choice programs do not contend that people are free not to become educated if that's what they'd prefer, or free to refuse to pay taxes that support education because they don't believe in it. Although both ideas were controversial at their inception, required consumption and required purchase are part of all principal school choice proposals.⁵ School choice advocates focus only on the selection of the school a child attends. Even on this issue, no proposal actually enables children to attend a school simply because their parents prefer it. Instead, as I discuss below, all of them rely on legal rules to allocate either to admissions officers or to school districts the power to determine the composition of the school population. The difference between efforts to promote homogeneity and efforts to promote diversity is itself produced by alternative structures of legal rules. As a result, a decision about which of these objectives to pursue does not require a choice between freedom and coercion. In fact, community building can be based on the very same devices—the organization of school funding and the assignment of students to schools—that are now used to promote metropolitan fragmentation.

Appeals to neighborhood and to choice often do have one thing in common: both are regularly invoked to foster the experience of sameness associated with voluntary associations, not the experience of a fortuitous association. And, many think, what people *want* are legal rules that produce homogeneous schools. But what people want is more complex than this claim suggests. First of all, most Americans support both neighborhood schools and school choice, at least for public schools, and these two starting points for educational policy conflict with each other. If outsiders could enroll in another neighborhood's school if they wanted to, it would no longer simply be a neighborhood school. A fully effective school choice program would undermine neighborhood schools more than "forced busing" ever did. Yet if neighborhoods had the power to exclude outsiders from their schools, the outsiders would not be free to choose where to go to school. Not only are these two policies contradictory but the decision parents make about which of them to prefer often turns on an evaluation of comparative educational quality. If parents thought that a diverse school would improve their children's education more than an homogeneous school would, they would want diversity. No doubt many parents now make a link instead between school quality and homogeneity. But this connection, currently under considerable attack in the educational literature, is itself fueled by the legal rules that limit the experience of diversity—in residential and commercial neighborhoods alike—in large parts of America's metropolitan areas. Even now there is considerable support in

America for integrated schools, from both whites and blacks, at least in principle. While most whites are unwilling to go to schools in which they are a minority—and most blacks are willing to be a minority only if they constitute more than a token presence in the schools—there is room for compromise, and no reason to think that these attitudes cannot be modified through further experience. In the minority of school districts in America with the most widespread and long-standing commitment to integrated education, there is considerable popular support for it.⁶

Interdistrict Community Building

An education policy designed to further community building can be based on an alteration of the legal significance now attributed to the state-created boundaries that define America's school districts. As the Connecticut Supreme Court declared in an important recent case, *Sheff v. O'Neill*, state districting statutes are "the single most important factor" determining the kind of students that attend the nation's public schools. Since they simultaneously define the location of the property that is taxed to support the schools, these statutes also are the single most important factor determining the resources available for public education. The most segregated school systems in America are located in those metropolitan areas that contain many small school districts easily distinguishable from each other by the extent of their exclusion of poor African Americans and Latinos—a common occurrence in America, one that has been blessed by Supreme Court decisions for more than twenty years. School district boundaries in these metropolitan areas function like city boundaries: they create a self-reinforcing mechanism that allocates school resources and middle-class students to some parts of the region rather than others. Real estate advertisements use schools as racial signals (the schools mentioned are always white schools), and these signals affect more than simply those who want to send their children to a racially homogeneous school. They also affect those who, while not opposing integration, do not want to send their children to schools in which they would be a racial minority, or that are filled with the social problems commonly associated with poverty. "If white families . . . face a choice between a central city area where all schools have 80 percent black . . . enrollments and dozens of virtually all-white suburban districts," as Gary Orfield puts it, "few will choose the city community." Few will choose a school populated predominantly by students from poor families as well. And America's segregated African American and Latino schools are dominated by poor children, while 96 percent of white schools have middle-class majorities.⁷

In *Sheff v. O'Neill*, the Connecticut Supreme Court became the first court in the nation to hold that a state districting statute—which in Connecticut had led to Hartford schools' becoming 92 percent black while suburban schools remained less than 10 percent black—violated a state constitutional prohibition of segregated education. The court's analysis of the impact of boundaries on educational segregation is convincing, but it would be a mistake, it seems to me, to assume that community-building efforts could be based on court cases of this kind. Decisions like *Sheff v. O'Neill* are unlikely to become common elsewhere in the country. There is bound to be considerable resistance to the integration of the schools unless the problems popularly associated with the public schools in poor neighborhoods—problems that the flight from these schools has itself helped bring about—are addressed. And these are not problems conventionally thought solvable by courts. The majority opinion in *Sheff v. O'Neill* was silent about the remedy for the constitutional violation it had found, while the dissenters argued, as do many commentators, that only a single metropolitan-wide school district would produce an integrated school system. But the creation of such a district, above all if court-ordered, would once again highlight the link between integration and coercive government action and once again place on education the entire burden of confronting racial and ethnic tension.

Overcoming the divisive impact of current school boundary lines, however, does not require court-ordered centralization of metropolitan school systems. Simply changing the location of school district boundary lines can open public schools to diversity in some areas of the country. There is nothing sacrosanct about the current location of these boundaries. The number of school districts in America has been declining for most of the century: from 127,531 in 1932 to 15,834 in 1992. And, particularly in the suburbs, the boundaries of these school districts regularly cross city lines. More than 75 percent of school districts are not contiguous with any other local boundary; only about one in ten tracks city boundaries.⁸ These boundary lines have long been relied on—and schools have been located—to ensure the separation of different kinds of students. They could now be redrawn with the opposite result in mind. This technique will by no means work everywhere. In many parts of the country, housing segregation is now so complete that no redrawing of school boundaries, short of centralizing the school system, can open suburban schools to diversity. In these metropolitan areas, however, community building can concentrate not on changing the location of the district lines but on undermining the conception of local autonomy they seek to delineate.

Local government law now frustrates community building by providing an entitlement to those who move to prosperous suburbs: buying a house enables them to participate in the collective power to allocate educational

resources and define public school admission requirements in a way that excludes the social problems and financial burdens associated with poverty. As I suggested above, this entitlement system analogizes school district boundaries to the boundaries of private property: whatever is located inside the boundary is “our” property, and the taxes derived from it can therefore be spent only on “our” children—at the very least, as a resource for supplementing the minimum level of education funded by the state. These references to “our” property and “our” children are references to a group, and the purpose of the regional negotiations over school funding that I envision is to expand the range of people that the group includes. When money is raised from a metropolitan region’s property-owners—industrial and commercial property-owners as well as residential property-owners, nonresident property-owners as well as homeowners—whose money is it? And whose children should benefit from it? Currently, the legally imposed tie between the resources available to school districts and the value of the property located within their borders empowers some neighborhood schools while disempowering others, as the nationwide litigation challenging the traditional methods of public school funding has made clear. Many states have therefore struggled to improve educational opportunities for those disadvantaged by this system. But even in these states there has been insufficient effort to undermine the privatized idea that the property located within a school district’s boundaries is a resource available solely to the people who live within the school district. Rejecting this notion does not necessitate equalized school spending throughout the region. A regional negotiation over school funding can allocate educational resources in countless ways. One possibility, for example, would be to reject the preference now given the localities that most effectively use their boundaries to defend their homogeneity, and to replace it with one that favors the region’s most integrated neighborhoods. The reason for giving these neighborhoods a preference is not simply that they produce schools filled with different kinds of students. The reverse is also true: integrated schools generate support for diverse neighborhoods and, thereby, contribute to the task of community building.

Changing the rules that govern the allocation of educational resources is unlikely, standing alone, to produce heterogeneous schools. It is also necessary to revise the current entitlement that now enables school districts to define who is eligible for admission to their schools. One way to make such a revision is through school choice. Consider a system, for example, in which parents could choose to send their child to any public school in their metropolitan area as long as diversity, and not segregation, was promoted by their choice. To ensure that such a plan would produce the greatest possible heterogeneity, admission to every school in the region would be equally open to all metropolitan residents. In other words, no

admission preference would be offered to students who lived within a school district's boundaries. Such an open admissions policy would resolve the conflict often asserted between self-interest and the allocation of school funding—why would anyone agree to allocate money to a diverse school rather than the one their own children attended?—by giving every child an equal chance of attending the best-funded school. It would also alter the structure of a number of current school choice programs, commonly called “controlled choice” plans, in order to make students' chances of being “insiders” and “outsiders” more equal. Under many current plans, such as the one adopted in Cambridge, Massachusetts, parents can choose to send their children to any public school as long as their choice promotes diversity. But they are largely limited to sending their children to schools within the school district in which they live because they can send them to another district's school only if there is “room” for them—that is, only if seats remain after all students who live in the district have been admitted—and only if the school district agrees to participate in the admission of outsiders. As a result, only a few “outsiders” are added to a student body predominantly entitled to admission as a matter of right.⁹

A decision to give an admission preference to district residents honors the school choice of some parents over that of others through the adoption of a state policy favoring neighborhood schools. It does not follow, however, that a regionwide school choice plan would establish the opposite policy, destabilizing neighborhood schools by bringing in a flood of outsiders. Its actual effect would depend on the outcome of regional negotiations over school funding because it would bring to the surface the conflict, mentioned earlier, between support for neighborhood schools and school choice. If it turned out that most people in the metropolitan area preferred neighborhood schools, the regional negotiation process would likely focus on making schools comparable enough so that most parents would choose to send their children to neighborhood schools. After all, a school choice program that offered no admission preference to neighborhood residents would undermine neighborhood schools (assuming most people preferred them) only if they substantially varied in quality. If, on the other hand, most people preferred to send their children to the best school in the region wherever it is located, the negotiations might focus instead on the dynamic that now makes residents of poor neighborhoods as reluctant to apply to out-of-district schools as residents of the more prosperous districts are to receive them.

Chances are, some elements of both of these agendas would be addressed. Many schools would become more integrated because children would no longer be disqualified from attending a school solely on the grounds that their parents cannot afford to buy a house nearby. Some

parents would send their children to out-of-district schools either because they thought they were better or because (when a parent worked in the area, for example) they were more convenient. On the other hand, a regionwide school choice program—even if combined with a regional allocation of educational resources—is unlikely to generate many transfers from suburban schools to those of poor African American and Latino neighborhoods. And many residents of these neighborhoods might continue to send their children to neighborhood schools, rather than to a suburban school, because of fear of racial antagonism, loss of identification with African American or Hispanic culture, or the undermining of ties to neighborhood institutions. Indeed, critics have argued that allowing the voluntary transfer of African American and Latino students to privileged white schools would simply lure top students from neighborhood schools and, thereby, intensify the decline of the schools left behind.¹⁰

The community-building plan that I've just described is not, therefore, the equivalent of a metropolitan plan for integrating the region's schools. Rather than trying to desegregate the schools overnight, it attempts to avoid the problems that have historically been engendered by the effort to foster integration simply by changing the school system. It concentrates instead on revising local government law. The proposal rejects the current legal rules that rely on school boundary lines to divide the region into unequally funded school districts populated by students readily identifiable in terms of racial and class categories. And it installs in their place a system that makes both educational resources and students the responsibility of the region as a whole. These changes will increase the diversity of many metropolitan schools, but they clearly are only one ingredient in the task of doing so. Equally important community-building efforts must become an integral part of other city services. In poor African American and Latino neighborhoods, this includes initiatives such as regionwide efforts to promote economic development and, as described in the next chapter, effective crime control. In the outer suburbs, it includes organizing a transportation system that promotes the mobility of those who rely on public transportation as well as those who drive. Without a coordinated program of all city services, in my view, a single-minded commitment to school integration—an insistence, for example, that all schools have the same percentage of white and black students, with other concerns left unaddressed—could exacerbate, in the black community and white community alike, the very tensions that community building is designed to overcome.

My version of community building also abandons the historic reliance of integration proponents on government orders and court mandates. Instead, it creates an educational system that is no more (or less) coercive than the current system. Under both systems, taxpayers' contributions are

allocated to other people's children as well as their own. And in both systems some parents will experience their children's school as chosen, while others will experience it as the only choice they have. To be sure, those who defend the current organization of public education will see my proposal as a scheme to reallocate the wealth and to undermine the ability of many parents to control the nature of their children's education. The element of truth in this reaction lies in the fact that every way of organizing public education affects the allocation of wealth and the composition of schools in America. The current organization of American education, when combined with other entitlements provided by local government law, such as the power to exclude the poor through zoning and to limit other city services solely to residents, powerfully affects the prosperity and life chances of Americans. The attachment to these current entitlements felt by many of those who benefit from them is not surprising. What is remarkable is that these benefits are so often considered to be the equivalent of property rights. There are no such property rights. On the contrary, it has been the fundamental understanding of local government law for almost a century that no one has a private right to benefit from the way America now organizes municipal governments. States are free to reorganize city boundaries and their attendant benefits at will, even if the reorganization makes some people's taxes go up.¹¹

Such a reorganization is well worth the effort. Altering the rules that govern school funding and admission requirements would transform the reference to "our" property and "our" children into a gesture toward a heterogeneous group, and it would assign to an equally heterogeneous group the task of deciding how to strengthen the school system. The process of regional negotiations would itself contribute to the task of community building by focusing everyone in the region on the job of educating all of the region's children rather than on fortifying the barriers that separate them from each other. This regionwide focus is essential. A major ingredient in the powerful, sometimes violent, opposition to integration in the 1960s and 1970s was the fact that suburbanization allowed privileged whites not to participate in the transformation of the public schools. The greatest opposition to integration occurred when, with suburban neighborhoods exempted, integration efforts focused only on white neighborhoods experienced by their residents, because of their proximity to black neighborhoods, as transitional and easily vulnerable to change. The vast majority of people who live in America's metropolitan areas would benefit from the elimination of the legally created suburban escape hatch. School funding would become more fairly allocated. All residents of the metropolitan area—not just the most mobile—would have a choice about the best school for their children. The concentration of poor children into a limited number of schools would be reduced. All public schools would,

once again, be open to everyone regardless of income. And, above all, parents and children from all income, racial, and ethnic categories would be able to develop more of a relationship with the variety of people who live in their metropolitan area, and thus benefit from the decrease in tension and increase in opportunities for learning that fortuitous associations offer. Once school systems became organized as fortuitous associations rather than as a series of separate voluntary associations, educational funding and innovation might even increase (thereby demonstrating the truth in the slogan “green follows white”).

The Relationship between Public and Private Schools

Would the adoption of such a community-building plan for public education result in a massive flight from public to private schools? The answer is far from clear. A flight to private schools is already under way in some parts of the country, and a major change in the public education system could well accelerate it. On the other hand, in the areas of the country in which integration has been regionwide and thus worked most successfully—places like Wilmington (Delaware), Louisville (Kentucky), and Charlotte (North Carolina)—the enrollment of the public schools is increasing notwithstanding the existence of a private school alternative. Escaping to a private school is much harder than moving to the suburbs. In the country as a whole, private schools now educate only 12 percent of America’s students, and many of them, such as Catholic schools in large central cities, are already quite diverse. Moreover, admission to the most “exclusive” private schools is a very expensive proposition. Few people in America can afford to pay for public schools and not use them. Besides, the rules of competition between public and private schools are themselves subject to change. Some metropolitan regions might decide, for example, to reexamine the continued public subsidization of private schools provided by tax-exemption and the funding of school transportation. It is not the task of community building, however, to make private schools unavailable. There are private alternatives for all city services, from private security to private transportation to private recreation, and draconian coercion would be required to eliminate them. The reason to organize city services to foster community building is not to abolish these private alternatives but to draw a distinction between them and city services: only public services would have the objective of fostering people’s capacity to live in a diverse society. The result of the competition between truly open public schools and private schools will ultimately depend on the success of these community-building efforts. If a decrease in apprehension about diversity can be combined with an improvement in the quality of the pub-

lic schools, the temptation to pay both taxes and school tuition might be reduced even for the wealthy.¹²

Some critics adopt a very different stance about the relationship between public and private schools. They argue that public support should be provided so that more people can send their children to private schools. From the perspective of these critics, my community-building proposal gives parents too limited a choice: no one is entitled to send a child to a private school or even to an out-of-district school if their child's admission makes the school more homogeneous. Why not, they might ask, give parents an absolutely free choice of schools that their children can attend? The answer is that no school choice proposal gives parents an absolutely free choice of schools. All of them offer only a "controlled choice," even though the label is now usually applied simply to a subset of school choice plans. The plans are distinguishable from each other only in terms of who exercises control, that is, whether admissions officers or government officials are given power to decide whether the child "fits in" to the school. School choice proponents who seek to limit the government's role in education insist that while children can apply to any school they like, wherever it is located, they should not get in unless the school officials decide to admit them. Some of these plans even allow a school to deny admission to those who cannot afford to pay the extra amount the school charges over the amount of public support for education. Of course, admissions officers, as well as local governments, can incorporate diversity rather than homogeneity into their definition of the kind of students they think will fit in to their school. And, as we have seen, government policy has long favored homogeneity over diversity. Still, the critical distinction among school choice plans is that advocates who favor allocating power to admissions officers justify doing so on the grounds that it allows individual schools to design their own student population. That way, the argument runs, different kinds of schools, made up of different kinds of students, can compete with each other for customers.¹³

By envisioning each school as a product offered in the market by those who run it, this consumer-oriented version of school choice adopts a privatized vision of educational services, whether or not the proposal includes private schools among those eligible to participate in government funding. Subject only to antidiscrimination laws, schools are encouraged to compete with each other by offering applicants a choice among voluntary associations to which they may apply for inclusion. The problem with this conception of school choice is not that it encourages competition—a metropolitan-wide open admissions policy would permit considerable competition. The problem is that it encourages a competition for exclusivity that separates and divides the population of the metropolitan area. Like the drawing of school district boundaries—and for the same reason—the abil-

ity of some schools to design “exclusive” admission standards destabilizes diverse schools throughout the school system. Antidiscrimination laws, which prohibit only “intentional” discrimination, have little impact on the dynamic that now splinters metropolitan school systems into distinct, even hostile, student bodies.¹⁴ Only a metropolitan-wide commitment to community building can undermine this dynamic. That is why no public money should be given to a school that is not open to the entire range of people who live within the metropolitan area. Openness should be the defining characteristic of all public schools—not just schools to which parents apply under a school choice plan but neighborhood schools and charter schools as well.

Such a definition of public schools poses no threat to the continued existence of decentralized school systems. Individual public schools organized to foster community building can be as responsive to teachers, students, and parents, and have as much control over curriculum content, as current schools. Once changes in the composition of schools got under way, it even seems likely that teachers, students, and parents would become more involved than they are now to ensure that their newly designed school will provide quality education. The identity of the participants would have changed—as it does already, given the mobility of the American population—but the motivation to make “our” school a good one will not disappear with the erosion of the privatized vision of school district boundaries. School meetings would instead become an important forum for the exercise of public freedom, one that would take the diversity of the participants involved as a given.

My proposal raises many unanswered questions. If demand for any particular school is too high to include all those who want to attend, should more schools in that part of the region be built, or should students who do not get their first choice of school be assigned to their second-choice school? Should the effort be made to ensure that neighborhood schools exist everywhere in the region, or should some schools be abandoned in favor of greater openness elsewhere? What priorities should be given to siblings? The purpose of decentralizing educational decision making is to allow these kinds of questions to be answered in many different ways once exclusion and funding inequality are no longer assumed ingredients in public education.

Community Building within the Schools

Revising the rules governing school funding and admission criteria is essential to educational community building because many current schools are not diverse enough for community-building efforts even to get under

way. But everyone knows that admitting different types of students into a school is not enough. Long-standing prejudices remain unaddressed, stereotypes are reinforced, tensions arise, cliques are formed. These phenomena now exist in diverse school systems throughout the country, and, later in life, graduates replicate them throughout the society as a whole. Education is a key ingredient in the task of dealing with these issues, not just for public school students but for their parents as well. Designing an educational process that is effective in doing so is an undertaking of great complexity. Here, I address only one of its components: confronting the widespread fear that diversity lowers the quality of education. This fear has not simply generated support for homogeneous schools. It also underlies the educational policy of segregating the student body in individual schools no matter how homogeneous or diverse they are.

The most important ingredient in this policy is academic tracking. The division of the student body into fast, average, and slow classes is pervasive in America's public schools—not just for English and math but, frequently, throughout the rest of the curriculum as well. This kind of categorization is based on a series of assumptions that link homogeneity and educational achievement. Students, it is thought, learn better when grouped with those who have similar academic abilities. Mixing students of different abilities holds the bright students back while undermining the confidence and learning capacity of the slow students. Therefore, bright students and slow students must be separated from each other, and they can be separated in a fair and reliable way. Every one of these assumptions is now being challenged in the education literature. Jeannie Oakes contends, for example, that there exist “virtually mountains of research evidence indicating that homogeneous grouping doesn't consistently help *anyone* learn better.” Highest-achieving students in heterogeneous classrooms, she says, are not held back because, notwithstanding popular assumptions to the contrary, classes are not geared to the lowest common denominator but are designed to expose all students to the highest level of curriculum content. Top students do equally well regardless of the group in which they learn; a few studies even suggest they do better in heterogeneous settings.¹⁵

Oakes' position about the effect of heterogeneity on the highest-achieving students is the subject of considerable controversy. But there is little controversy about her observation that those now placed in lower tracks learn better in heterogeneous classes. Tracking denies those assigned to lower tracks exposure to a vast amount of educational material and creative analytical skills considered indispensable in the modern American economy. It therefore demoralizes lower-track students—and reduces their educational potential—considerably more than does the interaction with faster learners in heterogeneous classrooms. Moreover, it divides white

students from students of color and, in racially homogeneous schools, separates students along class lines. Academic tracking is one of the ways Americans first learn that a heterogeneous group should be divided into categories, and that these categories should then be separated into different spaces—spaces not just for whites and blacks but for smart and dumb, college-bound and vocationally tracked, cool and nerd, blacks who identify with black culture and “brainiacs” who “act white.” This process has helped Americans learn an important, and destructive, lesson: being in the same space with different kinds of people not only feels uncomfortable but also impedes personal advancement.¹⁶

Experiments with heterogeneous classes are now under way throughout the country. Even if advocates’ descriptions of these classes are read skeptically, they suggest, at the minimum, that alternatives to homogeneous classrooms need to be seriously evaluated in every region of the country. The purpose of this evaluation is not to re-create the one big classroom of the little red schoolhouse. There are many ways to organize schools so that different kinds of students can encounter one another in the classroom. No doubt innovations in teaching techniques are required. And, clearly, the transition to heterogeneous classes has to be carefully managed, not only for students but for their parents as well. In fact, the most successful transitions to heterogeneous classrooms have included parent education as a major component—a process that itself contributes to community building. But experience has shown that, when successful, heterogeneous classrooms have a profound effect on students’ learning experience. High-achieving students in some heterogeneous classrooms, for example, have been teamed with “slower” classmates, the joint goal being to raise the overall average of the group. In conventional schools, this kind of team effort is generally limited to participation in sports; only there are students offered the possibility of experiencing someone else’s achievement as a victory for themselves. The extension of this kind of experience into the academic setting not only improves attitudes toward teaching and interpersonal skills but helps undercut the idea that educational achievement means celebrating the superiority of one’s A over a classmate’s C. As on sports teams, it would be a mistake to romanticize what this group interaction is like. Working with others produces tension, frustration, and disappointment. It would also be a loss for many parents—and many students—not to be able to celebrate a child’s achievement of being placed in the track designed for only the most gifted. But heterogeneous classes need not be free of tension or conflict or problems to be preferable to homogeneous classes. It is enough if they can advance the education of the student body while simultaneously lessening the overall level of divisiveness within the school.¹⁷

An educational system that allocated resources in a way that reduced the current favoritism now given schools with homogeneous student bodies, that prevented school district boundaries from being used to exclude outsiders because they were different, and that taught students, from an early age, how to work with classmates of disparate talents and capacities would help overturn the divisive structure that now characterizes most of America's metropolitan school systems. Even if such a plan could unequivocally be shown to improve educational quality, however, it would generate opposition. The reason is that homogeneous schools and academic tracking are part of another strategy that affects city services across the board—one that has responded to the widespread fear of violence in America by dividing and separating the metropolitan population. The organization of American education functions as a zoning mechanism for the public schools: it creates a safe space that excludes, at least from the “highest” tracks and the “best” schools, students who are seen not merely as different but as threatening and dangerous. To some extent, the schools themselves can lessen the pervasive fear of violence by taking steps to ensure school safety. But to be successful, these efforts have to be linked with a more ambitious program designed to reduce the level of violence in the society as a whole.