



School integration is not the answer

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Several years ago, I ran into then-Pinellas School superintendent Howard Hinesley at the concession stand during a local high school football game. We had a moment of small talk but soon got around to the potential "resegregation impact" of the district's ambitious school choice plan.

As we walked back to our seats, I asked the superintendent to tell me what he saw in the bleachers. He quickly saw what I was getting at: The overwhelming majority of the hundreds of students in the stands, along with their parents, were segregated along racial and ethnic lines.

Whites sat together in groups, and blacks sat together in groups. It was a virtual Balkans in the bleachers.

My point to the superintendent was that he and his teachers and administrators could not do what society at large does not do: force people, in their natural state, to associate with people with whom they prefer not to associate.

In other words, people in those bleachers had naturally chosen to be with others with whom they had a lot in common - with whom they felt most comfortable. The self-segregation that Hinesley and I witnessed was the most natural thing people do. Yet, we mandate that our public schools re-engineer the very self-segregation we practice in our daily lives away from our schoolhouses.

Look around. Our housing is mostly segregated along racial lines. Eleven o'clock, in church, on Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour of the week. Black kids hang out primarily with other black kids at our malls. White kids hang out with white

kids. Interracial marriages still raise eyebrows. And, yes, even in our public schools, you almost always will see white and black kids sitting at separate tables in the lunchrooms.

Still, we have placed the unfair burden of societal change on our public schools. I understand the inclination. In theory, we view the classroom - the academy - as a place of enlightenment.

It is where intelligent and ethical scholars teach and demonstrate the core principles, such as justice and equality, that make our democracy special in the world. It is the place where civility is praised as a virtue and is not mocked as a character flaw. It is a place where future scholars, practitioners and public servants are born.

For these and other admirable reasons, we invest untold amounts of tangible and intangible resources into efforts to prevent our public schools from resegregating. We continue to implement magnet programs, choice plans, majority-minority transfer schemes and other well-intentioned strategies to stop "white flight" and black saturation.

As a democracy, we instinctively, albeit uncomfortably, believe in racial integration in our schools. And for a long time, many of us believed that busing was the way to integrate and that integration was the panacea for a just, peaceful and educated America.

Now, four decades later, we should acknowledge that when court orders requiring desegregation are lifted and we are left to our own devices, we naturally resegregate.

In Pinellas, many blacks, especially NAACP members, reject the proposed student assignment plan that permits students to attend neighborhood schools. A real fear is that whites naturally will attend schools nearest to their homes, and blacks will do the same, making some schools majority white and others majority black.

Black opponents of the new plan believe that majority black schools will lose out on resources across the board, including teacher and staff quality. Their fear may be well-founded. I suspect, however, that a fundamental, more troublesome fear is at work: Too many blacks believe that for their children to learn effectively, they must be in class with white children. To them, racial integration is the only way for their children to learn, never realizing that they are indicting themselves as failed, nonessential players in their

children's intellectual lives. In other words, integration has become the surrogate parent for some.

White liberals who see integration as a moral obligation argue that school integration gives white children the opportunity to be in the presence of black children, a relationship that gives the races a chance to learn about each other. The end result, such whites believe, should be that black children will become smart, and white children will become smart and U.S. society will become better for everyone.

Perhaps they are right. I do not know. What I do know is this: School integration has not benefited black children as positively as it has children of other races and ethnicities. When we speak of the achievement gap, we are referring to black children. Integration is not closing the gap and will not close the gap without exceptional effort on the part of blacks.

A school is as good as the students who attend, as good as the parents who send their children to school, as effective as the teachers who teach the children, as efficient as the principal who runs the place. A mostly black or all-black school can be as good as its white counterpart. That said, parents should have the right to send their children to a majority black or a majority white school for the best education.

As the product of an all-black, Jim Crow era school in a small town, I am convinced, however, that racial integration is not necessary for a high-quality public school education. If the school district would sign an agreement guaranteeing equal resources in majority black schools, black parents should have no reason to demand integration.

Evidence tells me that integration, which we have had for nearly a half century, has not rescued most black children from the behaviors and culture that trap them in the cycle of failure. We need to try something different.