

Closing the Black-White Achievement Gap: A Public Theology for Public Education Reform¹

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE SUMMER OF 1990, I ALONG WITH FIVE HUNDRED OTHER RECENT COLLEGE graduates became a part of the work and mission of Teach for America, a national teacher corps of men and women who commit to teach for a minimum of two years in under-resourced urban or rural school districts. I was assigned to a bilingual first-grade class in the South Central region of Los Angeles. The school enrolled 1200 students in a building built to accommodate half that number. Of the 1200 enrolled, thirty-three were assigned to my class. But only twenty-nine student desks were available, so that some children had to use makeshift workspaces along the back wall. For the first three months of school I had no math books, and I was instructed by the school administration to “just make do.” The school library was an old portable classroom with books randomly strewn about the shelves. There was neither a librarian nor a card catalog system. There were no funds for field trips and no music, art, or physical education teachers. The halls were dark and dingy, and the smell of urine greeted anyone who passed near the boys’ bathroom.

Against the backdrop of these dire conditions, I attempted to teach my students to read, write, and do arithmetic. Unfortunately, I as the teacher learned much more than I was ever able to teach my students. I learned with brutal clarity and by first-hand experience the crippling power of inequity

¹ Early work on this paper began in a class on the “Theology and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.,” taught by Professor Peter J. Paris in the fall of 2000. His critical feedback has been indispensable to this project.

in public education in the lives of black and Hispanic youth. I learned what it looks like when children are denied a decent education. I gained new insight into the depth and devastation of the urban education crisis. It is this crisis that I intend to illumine and respond to in the analysis that follows.

No reasonable person can deny the glaring inequalities that exist in the American system of public education. Public schools in communities like Trenton simply do not compare to the public schools in places like Princeton. The differences in student achievement, quality of teachers, condition of facilities, and level of resources make these places seem worlds apart rather than a short drive away. Why does this dramatic differential exist? How did such a disparity come about? What can be done to eradicate this gap?

In this essay, I argue that the contemporary crisis in urban education is rooted in, and reflective of, a history of racial injustice, and is maintained by a system of structural inequities that privilege the narrow interests of predominantly white suburbanites vis-à-vis those of the urban poor. Furthermore, I suggest that “school choice” initiatives, one of the major current trends in urban school reform, wrongly perceive both the underlying causes and the effective solutions to the pattern of failure in the urban public schools. Rather, my analysis makes it clear that a viable solution to the urban school crisis must seriously attend to the structural and ideological character of the problem.

As an ethicist working out of an African American Christian tradition, my aim is to bring the moral resources of the Christian faith to bear upon the crisis caused by the vast inequalities in America’s public school systems. The issue of inequity in public education is not simply a sociopolitical problem; it is at its core a *moral* problem that has profound *theological* implications. I contend that the legally sanctioned distribution of grossly inequitable public educational opportunities is ideologically grounded in a racist view of humanity. Martin Luther King, Jr., once suggested that “the whole political, social, and economic structure of a society is largely determined by its answer to this pressing question [‘what is man?’]” (1985:17). If we want to know what is this society’s view of humanity, we need simply to analyze the structures that form our system of public schools. The stratification that characterizes the difference between the public schools attended by predominantly white wealthy suburbanites and those populated mostly by the black urban poor reflects the stratified hierarchy of humanity inherent in the underlying ideology of racism.

I should clarify at this point that my aim is not to suggest that the whole of the public education crisis can be understood under the rubric of race. Indeed, under the forces of class discrimination, for example, poor white children (often in rural communities) are also the victims of substandard public schooling. However, this reality does not minimize the fact that racism is a primary and pivotal source of the problem of educational inequity. Moreover, though other peoples of color—Hispanics, Native Americans, and various Asian groups, to name only a few—are often victims of poor schooling, my focus will be on the experience of African Americans. The distressingly disproportionate distribution of substandard public education encountered by black students warrants a focused consideration of the particularities related to their experience. As my analysis will show, the current inequity in public education is rooted in the history of forced enslavement and subsequent legally sanctioned segregation of African American people. Thus the alarming concentration of Black Americans in ineffective public schools today is merely a continuation of the racist practices that have persisted over the years since the end of legalized slavery. Hence addressing the so-called “achievement gap” in education must begin by dismantling the ideology of racism and the view of humanity that it embodies. Moreover, a more inclusive view of humanity must be incorporated into the ethos of our society. Toward this end, Christian ethics has the potential to make a helpful contribution.

A racist view of humanity stands diametrically opposed to traditional Christian anthropology. The Judeo-Christian tradition affirms the inherently equal worth or value of all persons based on the understanding that all humans are created equally in the image of God and equally share the status of children of God. The sacred equality of human persons before God renders all racist ideologies and practices idolatrous. Though many Christian groups and persons have stood clearly on the wrong side of justice with regard to racism and the view of humanity that it promotes, their actions represent an aberration and not an affirmation of a Christian anthropology.

A Christian view of humanity offers a corrective to the racist pattern of inequity in public education. In particular, the theological anthropology of Martin Luther King, Jr., is a resource for constructing a viable public theology to address this insidious social ill. While other theologians have had more to say on the doctrine of humanity than did King, few have been as effective at attending to this concept on the levels of both theory and praxis. King was able to explicate effectively the sociopolitical implications of his

view of humanity so as to expose the injustices inherent in this nation's social, political, and economic structures and encourage their reorientation in concert with the moral demands of an ethical view of humanity. Thus King's view of humanity, with its strong sociopolitical content, provides a strategic framework for assessing and addressing the crisis in public education.

To be sure, by appealing to King's theologically construed concept of humanity, my argument is faced with the serious challenge of mediating the obvious tension between an explicitly Christian perspective and the pluralistic context in which public education occurs. Indeed, this is the challenge of public theology. With regard to this challenge, the strength of King's theological anthropology is that it has the capacity to transcend the community of the Christian faith and find common moral ground with others from diverse non-Christian contexts. One does not have to embrace the explicitly Christian aspects of King's anthropology in order to accept the basic premises of his view. As King well demonstrates, there are numerous secular affirmations of the Christian view of humanity that he supports. In the vein of what David Tracy (1981) calls an "analogical imagination," King's view finds "analogues" or parallels to Christian concepts in the insights drawn from secular psychology, biology, and sociology as well as in the founding documents of this nation. A careful review of King's anthropology will illuminate its viability as a resource for the public dialogue on education reform.

KING'S VIEW OF HUMANITY

The biblical concept of the "image of God" functions as the theological basis for King's view of humanity. The image of God, with which all humanity is endowed, embodies the essence of what it means to be human. Interestingly, although various interpretations of the image of God have been offered over the centuries by Christian thinkers, King is not preoccupied with attempting to achieve an exact characterization of the form that God's image takes in human identity. Rather, for him, the significance of the image lies primarily in its *function*. In King's thought the notion of the image of God establishes a special sense of relatedness between God and humans. He refers to this image as "the indelible stamp of the creator" that is "etched" in every person (1968:97). The significance of the stamp is not as much in the attributes that it implies as in the relationship that it reflects. "Human worth," King argues, "lies in relatedness to God" (1968:97). Hence the Divine/human

relationship that is reflected by the image of God becomes a principal prism through which to view the nature of humanity. This theological foundation gives rise to the three themes that constitute the core concepts in King's view of humanity: worth of persons, the unity of humanity, and the concept of freedom.

Worth of Persons

King, in common with broader Christian tradition, views all humans as innately possessing an equally sacred status by virtue of the image of God implanted in every person. God's image in each human person functions as a declaration of the intrinsically equal dignity and value of each individual before God (King 1986:118–19). Because of this inherent equality before God, King does not separate human personality and human worth. The former implies the latter. Thus an essential aspect of what it means to be human is to possess this essential worth. Any denial of the *worth* of a person is a denial of the *humanity* of a person.

In King's thought, the link between the image of God and the Divine/human relationship provides the theological rationale for essentially equal human worth. The intrinsically equal and sacred worth of all persons, sometimes referred to as the "sacredness of human personality," is inscribed in the human personality by virtue of the Divine/human relationship that is reflected by the image of God in the human person (King 1968:118). God is the Divine parent of all humanity. By creating all humans in God's image, God makes all humans equally sons and daughters in the family of God, thereby affirming the equal sacredness of all persons. Thus King often attributes the worth of a person to the claim that she or he "is a child of God" (1967:72).

The sacredness of the human personality implies that humans should treat one another also in accordance with the essentially equal human value that their common relatedness to God implies. The Kantian ethical principle of treating humans always as ends rather than as means reinforces King's thinking on the essential worth of all persons. According to King, segregation reduces its victims to *means only* rather than respecting them as *ends* in and of themselves. Treating persons as ends involves respecting the equal dignity intrinsic to all persons by virtue of their equal status as images of God and resisting the practice of treating persons merely as pawns in service of the interests of others. Similarly, Martin Buber's concept of the "I-

thou” relationship provides King with a paradigm illustrating respect for the equal worth of persons. All human relationships should be characterized by the mutual human worth implied in the “I-thou” relational structure. This paradigm suggests that each subject treats and respects the other as a subject and never as an object. In King’s view, systems of racial injustice promote what Buber described as an “I-it” relationship, in which oppressed persons are treated as objects whose worth is viewed only in terms of the benefits they render to those who are responsible for their oppression (King 1986:119). Both the person as means only and the “I-it” ideologies reflect an abuse of the “image of God” and a violation of the essentially equal worth with which all humanity is endowed.

In King’s view segregation reflects a view of humanity that can never be reconciled to the anthropology of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Segregation, like all racist structures, functions on the basis of a false understanding of humanity. It wrongly assumes that distinctions that are irrelevant to human worth, in this case racial identity, may justify the grossly unequal treatment of a part of humanity by another part of that same humanity. He argues, “This innate worth referred to in the phrase the image of God is universally shared in equal portions by all men. There is no graded scale of essential worth; there is no divine right of one race which differs from the divine right of another” (1986:119). Because all persons are equally endowed with sacred worth by God, all persons should be respected equally by other human beings. Hence social, political, and economic structures that promote unjustifiable inequality among persons violate the principle of equal essential human worth. In a viable view of humanity the equal worth of all persons is respected in a way that allows all people to flourish. Hence in King’s thought the notion of the worth of persons functions as a standard by which to measure the adequacy and accuracy of a society’s understanding of humanity.

The Unity of Humanity

The “unity of humanity,” a second core concept in King’s view of humanity, is integrally related to the first principle. God’s image in human personality not only reflects the equal essential worth of persons, it also bears implications for the way that humans are related to one another. The image of God

in humanity implies a parental relationship between God and humans. The logical extension of the parenthood of God is the idea of the sister-brotherhood of humankind. King also found biblical warrant to support this conviction in the Pauline assertion that all nations were created by God out of one blood. Such a claim, he contends, even has the support of scientific evidence. "The world's foremost anthropologists," he writes, "all agree that there is no basic difference in the racial groups of our world. . . . There are four major blood types and all four are found in every racial group" (1986:122).

The unity of humanity is further affirmed by what King often refers to as the "sociality of human life" (1963:65–66). This phrase expresses the idea that human beings are inherently social creatures whose well-being and identity formation rely upon cooperative interaction with others. This is what King means when he writes, "The self cannot be self without other selves. I cannot reach fulfillment without thou. Social psychologists tell us that we cannot truly be persons unless we interact with other persons" (1986:122). King found concrete evidence for the principle of sociality in countless instances of human interrelatedness in the world:

Every nation is an heir of a vast treasury of ideas and labor to which both the living and the dead of all nations have contributed. . . . We are everlasting debtors to known and unknown men and women. When we arise in the morning, we go into the bathroom where we reach for a sponge which is provided for us by a Pacific islander. We reach for soap that is created for us by a European. Then at the table we drink coffee which is provided for us by a South American, or tea by a Chinese or cocoa by a West African. Before we leave for our jobs we are already beholden to more than half of the world (1968:181).

The reality of human interdependence, in King's view, calls for mutual concern and responsibility among all humanity. The well-being of humanity is contingent upon humans acting cooperatively toward the realization of a community where the good of the whole is prioritized as a strategy for achieving the good of the individuals constituting the whole. For King, the very structure of the universe as created by God implies the need for such a cooperative vision of humans living in interdependent communities. He claims that "the universe is so structured that things do not quite work out rightly if men are not diligent in their concern for others" (1986:122).

The Concept of Freedom

Finally, King's view of humanity stresses an inextricable link between human life and the concept of freedom. King asserts that "the very character of life demands freedom" (1986:119). Like the worth of persons, the concept of human freedom emerges from King's understanding of the image of God. Freedom, according to King, constitutes "the highest expression of the image of God." In the sermon on the doctrine of humanity King states: "theologians have interpreted the image of God in many ways, and after studying all of them, I've come to the conclusion. The highest expression of the image of God in man is freedom. Man is man . . . because he's free" (quoted in Baker-Fletcher 1993:118).

The language and thought of Paul Tillich provides King with the theological construct upon which to base the connection between freedom and the image of God. King's statement equating freedom with the image of God is clearly drawn from Tillich's *Systematic Theology* (1967). Moreover, King defines freedom as the capacity for deliberation, decision, and responsibility, the same three terms that Tillich uses in defining freedom. The first of these human capacities, *deliberation*, involves the freedom to consider and weigh one's alternatives as to what one may become or do. Closely related to this idea is the capacity for *decision*, by which humans make choices based on the outcomes of their deliberations. Finally, the capacity for *responsibility* suggests that freedom renders humans ultimately responsible for the decisions that they make (King 1986: 120).

For King, the freedom inherent in human personality is not without limits. Human freedom is limited and shaped by human destiny. King writes, "We are both free and destined. Freedom is the chosen fulfillment of our destined nature" (1986:120). In King's thought, however, destiny does not constitute determinism. The connection he makes between freedom and destiny is best understood in light of the Tillichian formulation upon which King draws. For Tillich freedom and destiny represent an ontological polarity in which "destiny points not to the opposite of freedom but rather to its conditions and limits" (1967:184). Hence destiny does not contradict the freedom implied by the human capacity for deliberation, decision, and responsibility. Rather in Tillich's words:

Destiny is that out of which our decisions arise . . . it includes the communities to which I belong, the past unremembered and remembered,

the environment which has shaped me, the world which has made an impact on me. . . . Destiny is not a strange power which determines what shall happen to me. It is myself as given, formed by nature, history, and myself. My destiny is the basis of my freedom; my freedom participates in shaping my destiny (1967:184–85).

This connection between freedom and destiny, which King borrows from Tillich's thought, increases our understanding of the meaning of freedom for King's view of humanity. In King's understanding, freedom is a prerequisite for human destiny. In order for one to fulfill his or her destiny, one must be able to experience the freedom that is essential to the meaning of humanity. The extent to which human freedom is circumvented by the social, political, and economic structures of society represents the degree to which human destiny, and consequently human dignity, also are limited. This is the insight that is behind King's claim that in the denial of a person's freedom, "the very nature of life is altered and his being cannot make the full circle of personhood because that which is basic to the character of life itself has been diminished" (1986:121).

Though King's notion of human freedom is drawn largely from Tillich's thought, King extends this principle well beyond the theoretical realm where Tillich's treatment ends. King pushes Tillich's ideas on freedom toward their logical sociopolitical conclusions. He employs the idea of human freedom as a moral condemnation of racial segregation. Segregation, he argues, denies African Americans the freedom to deliberate, decide, and take responsibility, because it severely and unjustly limits the options available to black people. These imposed limitations, from King's perspective, constitute not only a political injustice but also a violation of the freedom that human life inherently demands in order for each person to fulfill his or her human destiny. In a sermon delivered in 1957, King said, "To rob a man of his freedom is to take from him the essential basis of his manhood. To take his freedom is to rob him of something of God's image" (Baker-Fletcher 1993:120).

Justice is the axiological principle upon which these three core themes turn. The content of King's understanding of justice is largely informed by his view of humanity. Justice is constituted by a respect for equal human dignity, a concern for others based on the unity of humanity, and a respect for the freedom that human life demands. In the connection between justice and human personality lies the pivotal point from which the

sociopolitical implications of King's concept of humanity emerge. Justice demands that the core characteristics of humanity—equal worth, unity, and freedom—are not treated simply as abstract principles but are actualized in the real experiences of all human beings. Thus the structures of society must be ordered to promote these fundamental human conditions for all people. All structural realities that run counter to the core concepts in King's view of humanity are repressive and in need of deconstruction. King's view of humanity provides a helpful guideline, therefore, for defining what justice demands in the public education crisis. The lens of King's theological anthropology, I contend, exposes the racist view of humanity that undergirds the structure of public schooling in America and demonstrates the need for a more just system. A careful consideration of the structural aspects of public education will help substantiate this claim.

STRUCTURAL DESCRIPTION

Paramount among the structural forces framing the education crisis is the system of public school funding. In virtually every state the primary funding for public schools is generated from local property taxes. Schools are funded based on the amount of property taxes levied in the municipality or local community where they are located. Thus the level of funding available to each school district is determined largely by the property values within the community.² Districts with higher property values have a capacity to generate higher tax dollars and fund their schools at a higher rate of per-pupil expenditure than do those districts with moderate and low property values.

This funding formula imposes an inherent structural bias against poor urban communities by ensuring a school-funding disparity between the affluent and the poor. Urban communities simply lack the level of property values necessary to fund their schools at a sufficient level. Moreover, because poor people cannot afford to live in affluent communities and because the

² In most states the limited property tax funding in poor school districts is supplemented with other funding sources (e.g., lottery income, other state taxes, federal dollars). However, these supplemental dollars are never sufficient to bring per-pupil expenditures in poor schools up to the level of their suburban counterparts. See Wise 1967:130–32.

zoning boundaries that separate one school district from another are drawn in a way that creates wealthy districts and poor districts rather than socio-economically diverse districts, the possibility of shared resources between the urban poor and wealthy suburbanites is virtually non-existent.

The local property tax school-funding formula reflects and protects the interests of the dominant class whose position of power and privilege enables them to formulate and formalize such a policy successfully. Even though property taxes are actually state taxes and not local taxes, the laws in most states allow local communities to retain these particular funds in a way that privileges the interests of the wealthy (Wise 1967:104). These property taxes, which are public funds generated for a public purpose, are disproportionately distributed to wealthy, predominately white communities for the public education of their children. The interests of African Americans and the poor were clearly not represented in the decision-making process that yielded such a biased funding system. It is no wonder, then, that they have been locked into a system of dysfunctional and underresourced schools.

The inequality in per-pupil expenditures between wealthy and poor districts is incredible. Kozol highlights these inequalities with examples in cities like New York and Chicago. He notes that in 1990 the wealthy New York suburb of Manhasset spent \$15,084 per pupil, while urban New York City schools spent less than half that amount, \$7,299 per student. In the same year, a Chicago suburb expended \$9,371 per student, whereas the Chicago public schools spent only \$5,265 (Kozol 1991:2-3). These samples are only part of a wide-scale pattern of inequality. In fact, research conducted by three major education-related organizations reveals that nationally, schools in wealthy suburban communities spend "as much as ten times" that expended by their urban counterparts (Anyon 1997:7).

The limited funding afforded poor urban schools translates into poor educational opportunities for urban youth. These inadequacies take the form of old and decaying buildings, unmanageable class sizes, limited instructional supplies, outdated equipment, inexperienced and poorly paid teachers, limited access to qualified teachers in the important fields of math and science, as well as a host of other disabling disparities.

The degree of disparity between urban and suburban schooling is reinforced by the social and economic conditions under which poor students are forced to live and learn. The exodus of city industries and middle-class families, along with a steep decline in federal funding to cities, has produced

disproportionately high levels of poverty, joblessness, and physical devastation in American urban centers (Anyon 1997:5, 62–63).³ Middle-income employment opportunities are virtually non-existent for the poorly educated and under-educated persons who primarily populate American cities. As a result, opportunities for urban dwellers are limited either to unemployment or low-wage service positions that fail to provide a livable family income (Wilson 1996:152).

The chronic failure of urban schools to provide students with a quality education reinforces the lowered ceiling of opportunity afforded to urban youth. In most cases the youth educated in inner-city public schools become high-school dropouts or very poorly educated high school graduates. In either case, their chances of acquiring legitimate work that provides a decent standard of living are miniscule. Given these gloomy prospects, urban youth have little incentive for taking their public education very seriously.

Moreover, coupled with the conditions of chronic poverty and joblessness are several attending social ills, such as crime, gang violence, drug trafficking, and family breakups (Wilson 1996:21). Life is a daily struggle for many urban youth. They do not have the luxury of walking to school on streets that are safe. Many of them live every day with the very real threat of encountering violence and other criminal behavior. A study conducted in ten inner-city public high schools revealed that 22 percent of the student body possessed guns. When asked why, most students attributed their weapon possession to the need to protect themselves (Wilson 1996:61). Violence is so disproportionately present in inner-city neighborhoods that urban kids are more likely than any other group to view violence as simply a way of life (Prothrow-Stith 1991:32).

The combined interactions of these daunting structural forces—inequitable school funding, a severely depressed and neglected urban economy, and high levels of criminal and other destructive social activity—severely circumvent the capacity for providing quality education in urban public schools. To be sure, a viable program of education reform must attend to these serious factors. However, before these structural mechanisms can be effectively uprooted, the ideological basis upon which they are grounded must be uncovered, rooted out, and replaced by a morally sound perspective. The racist ideology that underlies these structural forces is best illuminated by viewing the crisis in urban education in its historical context.

³ For a more detailed analysis of these causal forces, see Wilson 1996.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

From its incipient stages, American public education embodied and institutionalized the principle of racism. Both legal codes and social practices restricting the educational opportunities of black people effectively institutionalized racism, furthering the disparity between white and black political, social, and economic conditions. In the slave-holding South and the non-slave-holding North, blacks were either excluded from schooling altogether, or assigned to segregated schools.⁴ In many Southern states not only were slaves prohibited from attending schools, but schooling was also outlawed for free blacks as well. State legislatures in the South routinely denied the petitions of free blacks for access to public schools. In 1860, at the height of the common schools movement, “only 1.8 percent of the blacks aged five to twenty were in school, this compared to 56 percent of the whites; only about 5 percent of the slave population was literate” (Marcus and Stickney 1981:15).

When blacks were allowed by law to attend a public school, it was almost always a segregated school. However, segregated schools meant inferior schools. In 1859 a New York newspaper reported:

The school houses for whites are in situations where the price of rents is high, and on the buildings themselves no expenditure is spared to make them commodious and elegant. . . . The schools for blacks, on the contrary, are nearly all, if not all, old buildings, generally in filthy and degraded neighborhoods, dark, damp, small and cheerless, safe neither for the morals nor the health of those who are compelled to go to them, if they go anywhere, and calculated rather to repel than to attract them (Marcus and Stickney 1981:13).

The per-pupil spending disparity between white students and black students was enormous. For every dollar spent on a black student in 1859, New York City spent \$1,600 per white student.

After the Civil War, segregated schools became the normative paradigm in both the North and South. In this way, the established racist practice of

⁴ In rare cases, usually in the Northern states, blacks were allowed to attend classes with white students. However, their treatment was usually so abusive that their learning capacity was seriously impaired. See Marcus and Stickney 1981:12.

social segregation for whites and blacks in society at large was extended to separate white and black educational experiences as well. This paradigm provided the structural framework for excluding blacks from the same quality of educational opportunities afforded to most whites. In 1896 the United States Supreme Court, in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, legally institutionalized the system of segregated schooling by ruling that “separate but equal” facilities for blacks and whites were constitutionally permitted. This ruling further ingrained the pattern of inequality between black and white schooling.

It would take almost sixty years after *Plessy v. Ferguson* before the highest court in this land would affirm what African Americans had known and shown for over one hundred years: separate schools were never equal schools. With that landmark case, *Brown v. Board of Education*, the issue of inequity in public education was forced onto the agenda and consciousness of the nation. In theory, even if not in practice, this decision revolutionized the structure of public education in this country. It solidified the constitutional right of African Americans in particular, and all Americans in general, to equal educational opportunity.

Nevertheless, in almost half a century after the *Brown* decision, public schools remain highly segregated and grossly unequal. This riddling reality is in large measure due to the enormous resistance of white America to the vision of equal and integrated public schools for black and white children. From the very day that the *Brown* decision was handed down, a day that many white Southerners termed “black Monday,” many whites, in both word and deed, committed themselves to the goal of dismantling and undermining all attempts to enforce the Supreme Court decision. Some Southern states threatened to close schools rather than integrate. In some cases biased and racist admission examinations were instituted to prevent black students from enrolling in white schools. When these and other more covert maneuvers failed, mobs of white Southerners simply took to the streets and became a human barrier to black admission.

Under the pressure of civil rights organizations, the federal government instituted measures such as threatening the loss of federal money to school districts that failed to comply with desegregation laws, and later forced busing strategies to achieve integrated public schools. However, these measures accomplished very little in terms of school integration or equity among black and white pupils. Overwhelming white resistance to school desegre-

gation efforts prevented any real progress from taking place. Often, whites simply moved from the cities to suburban communities, where they could protect themselves from the demands of desegregation in general, and forced busing in particular. With the failure of court-ordered busing and other desegregation mechanisms, the battle for equal educational opportunity lost much of its steam, so that the inequalities highlighted by the *Brown* decision remain entrenched today in America's public school system.

The current tension and disparity between urban and suburban public schooling grows out of this long history of political, social, economic, and educational injustice committed against African Americans. The practice of legally sanctioned segregation as a vehicle for perpetuating racial inequity in public education has been replaced with the de facto segregation created by the concentration of whites in America's suburbs and the concentration of African Americans in urban centers. The political power and influence of white suburbanites enable them to maintain a system of public education that privileges their interests over and against those of the black urban poor. When white Americans left the cities for suburban communities and cities became predominantly black neighborhoods, the level of investment in urban schools plummeted (Anyon 1997:155).

Hence the stark difference between urban and suburban public education that we witness today relies upon structures and practices that are formed and perpetuated based on the ideology of racism. From the "white flight" that created the contemporary predominantly white suburb, to the school funding formula that divides public dollars for education in a way that privileges the private interests of wealthy white suburbanites, to the pattern of neglect that has severed urban communities from opportunities for economic development and political power—the structural forces that perpetuate failure in urban public schools reek with the odor of racist ideology.

The problem with current school reform proposals is that they fail to acknowledge and address the structural and ideological nature of the public school crisis. Educational reformers, social scientists, and politicians vigorously debate both the causes of, and solutions to, this problem. Out of these debates have grown a number of education reform initiatives intended to address this crisis. Some of the major recent trends in school reform fall under the headings of school choice, decentralization, and school restructuring. This paper will address primarily proposals for "school choice," as

this suggestion has gained significant popularity in recent years and it is, in my opinion, one of the most dangerous and deceptive responses to inequity in public education.

CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF SCHOOL CHOICE INITIATIVES

In the politics of public education, “school choice” has become a code word for reform initiatives intended to empower parents with greater choices about where and how their children are educated. According to school choice proponents, the primary causes of public school failure include stagnant bureaucracy, rigidity, and the limited capacity of parents and concerned persons to force schools to change. Choice initiatives, therefore, empower parents with the capacity to avoid the inadequacies of their local school by placing their children in schools of their choice, using the funding that would normally go to their local neighborhood school. Public schools, then, are subject to the competitive pressures of the “educational marketplace.” Choice proponents believe that, under the pressure of such a system, traditional public schools will either improve or perish.

The two major types of school choice initiatives are educational vouchers and charter schools. Educational vouchers allow parents to use public school funds to pay for their child’s education at a public or private school of their choice. If a school district spends \$5000 per pupil, for example, a parent would be issued a voucher in this amount (or an amount that approximates the school per-pupil expenditure as much as possible) that could be applied to the tuition at a school other than the public school to which the student is normally assigned. Several variations exist within the scope of the voucher concept. Some voucher advocates propose “highly regulated” vouchers that are intended to prevent greater school segregation or to disallow the use of public funds for tuition at religious schools. Others support unregulated voucher systems that would allow all families access to vouchers and would not limit the types of schools eligible to receive voucher funds (La Noue 1972:v).

Charter schools, the more popular choice paradigm, are public, non-sectarian schools that function under a written contract, or charter, from a local or state school board. Charter schools allow local stakeholders, usually parents, community leaders, and teachers, to form alternative public schools in their communities. These charter schools are free from many of the regu-

lations that are binding on traditional public schools. For example, charter schools are sometimes freed from adherence to district-formulated teacher salaries so that they may modify their budgets to increase teacher pay and attract and retain higher quality teachers. Some of the other innovations that charter schools employ include longer school days, strict discipline codes for students, and creative curricula that deviate from the state- and district-mandated instructional practices. In return for greater creative freedom, charter schools are required to set and achieve certain student improvement goals. Usually, after about five years, school charters are reviewed and either renewed or revoked based on demonstrated achievements of the schools' stated goals.

Since Minnesota passed the first charter school legislation in 1991, thirty-six other states have followed suit, creating more than two thousand charter schools serving over 500,000 students (Center for Education Reform 2001). Unlike voucher programs, charter school legislation has enjoyed strong bipartisan support, due largely to the fact that charter schools do not bear the stigma of transferring public funds to private schools. Of course, many opponents of charter schools claim that the per-pupil expenditure that follows students to these charter schools places an undue stress on the already troubled school budgets of traditional schools.

In the last ten years, educational vouchers and charter schools have been suggested as viable remedies to the pattern of failure on the part of traditional public schools to provide adequate educational opportunities to urban students. In the case of vouchers, in particular, there is very limited and often conflicting evidence on the question of whether African American students experience achievement gains in the schools that they attend using private vouchers. In fact, three major studies reveal three different conclusions. A 1995 study of the Milwaukee school choice program determined that "there were no relative achievement gains among the choice students." A 1997 study reported that "students made statistically significant test score gains in both reading and math by their third year." And a more recent study shows that "students selected to attend choice schools experienced significantly faster gains in math scores, but showed no differential in reading" (Rouse 1998:62).

Similarly, charter schools exhibit mixed results in terms of student achievement. In many cases they have reported gains in student test scores. And, across the board, parents of charter school students seem to be pleased with their children's new learning environments. However, there are as many

charter school failure stories as there are success stories. In Michigan, for example, a recent analysis of the state's 138 charter schools showed that charter school students lagged behind students in regular public schools in all subject areas of the state's student achievement exam (MEAP). In other states the evidence shows similar results. As one state Board of Education official put it, "some are doing good work. Some aren't" (Hornbeck 1999:6).

In fairness to charter schools and voucher programs, it should be noted that the question of whether these measures improve student achievement cannot be resolved by the current evidence. To date, the data is simply too inconclusive. I contend, however, that the debate about the issue of school choice has focused too narrowly on the statistical data examining the relationship between achievement and school choice. While the insights gleaned from social science research provide an invaluable resource, the ethical questions surrounding the issue offer a more useful way of framing the debate. To what extent are choice initiatives a viable option for achieving the aim of equity in public education for *all* African Americans and other traditionally oppressed groups? Under the lens of this inquiry, in my view, the inadequacies and limitations of choice initiatives emerge.

Inherently, school choice programs lack the capacity for achieving justice for all or even most students in poor urban communities. They are, at best, band-aid remedies to a broad and systemic problem. While charter schools and educational vouchers may provide a better education for a few African American youth, these programs do not and cannot achieve improved educational opportunities for all or even most black urban students. The limited supply of high quality public and private schools prevents the possibility of significant numbers of black urban youth attending effective charter schools or voucher schools.

Furthermore, voucher programs are voluntary, not mandatory. Schools have the option of accepting or denying these voucher students. In many cases, students with vouchers are declined admission to the voucher schools to which they applied (Johnson, Piana, and Burlingame 2000). By their actions these schools make it clear that they do not intend to open their doors to any significant number of black children from urban neighborhoods. Moreover, history has taught us that parents and school leaders in predominantly white schools are willing to go to great lengths to ensure that black enrollment is kept at a minimum in their schools.

Similarly, charter schools are inherently limited in their capacity to provide true equity. In practically every state there is a legal limit to the num-

ber of charter schools allowed to operate in the state. Thus charter schools (the ones that work) become an elite group of public schools for a few “lucky” students. Unless every school becomes a successful charter school, there is no potential for systemic change via this strategy.

Moreover, the faith that school choice proponents place in the positive effects that choice schools will have on traditional schools is, at best, misguided and, at worst, deliberately deceptive. Unfortunately, the existing evidence is completely inadequate for determining the capacity of competitive market forces to ignite improvement in traditional American public schools. However, a study of school choice policies in New Zealand presents some instructive insights on this question. With more than ten years of school choice experience and data, New Zealand provides a fruitful domain of analysis for assessing the effects of choice and competition on the most troubled schools. The results of the New Zealand study suggest that market competition in schooling has positive effects for a large number of students, but does not solve the educational failure of the “troubled urban schools” (Fiske and Ladd 2000b:208). Even under school choice initiatives, New Zealand minority students in poor urban schools continued to suffer from severe lack of academic achievement.

The theory underlying the New Zealand reform and market-based reforms in the United States holds that schools will become better if they are given operational flexibility and are prodded by the need to compete for students. The troubled urban schools we observed in New Zealand had operational flexibility. They certainly had incentives to offer programs that were attractive to parents and students. And in some cases they were well-managed. Yet still they were unable to compete successfully in the new educational market (Fiske and Ladd 2000a).

Choice ideology, in my view, wrongly assumes that the primary problem is one of bloated bureaucracies and powerful teachers’ unions that stifle teacher creativity and undermine student learning. This logic fails to take seriously the history of political, social, and economic injustices committed against African Americans in particular, and the poor in general. The principles and practices of parental choice and competitive market forces neither intend nor are able to reconfigure the political, social, and economic structures that have created and that perpetuate the contemporary crisis. Greater choice and competition cannot solve the problems of inequitable

school funding formulas, chronic poverty and joblessness, and the political and economic impotence of urban communities vis-à-vis suburban communities that underlie current public educational inequity.

Most importantly, the school choice proposal for education reform contributes to the perpetuation rather than the eradication of the ideology of racism. Rather than insisting upon quality schooling in urban neighborhoods and communities where black children live, choice measures make it incumbent upon black urban families to find effective schools, often outside their local communities. Conversely, white wealthy families are not forced to secure vouchers and go hunting for a good school or to design a charter school for their children. They simply send their children to the neighborhood public school and are able to expect a quality education for their children. A non-racist view of humanity requires that the same convenient and quality option ought to be available for all persons who attend American public schools.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

A viable strategy for achieving equity in public education must be informed by an adequate understanding of the ideological and structural nature and scope of the problem and must, therefore, address the matter on these critical levels. Hence any viable solution to the public education crisis will require the repudiation of the racist ideology, and the deconstruction of the racist structures that perpetuate this perverted principle. Ultimately, all Americans must constructively resolve to develop and institute social, political, and economic structures that are grounded in a non-racist view of humanity. To that effect, I offer three general policy directives intended to push forward the development of a more equitable system of public education in this country. These policy-related recommendations are not meant to be conclusive; rather, they are suggestive of the kinds of structural changes that must be made in order to eradicate the racism that currently pervades American public education systems.

Equitable School Funding

Any school reform effort sincerely committed to quality education for all children must seek equity in per-pupil spending among all public schools.

Let us not be naïve; though money is not the only factor necessary for quality schools, money matters. In fact, it matters a lot. Unless urban schools acquire the funds necessary for higher teacher salaries, adequate equipment, early childhood programs and decent facilities, they will never be able to compete with their wealthy suburban counterparts.

A major obstacle in the effort to secure equitable funding for historically under-financed schools is the inconclusive and conflicting evidence regarding the relationship between school expenditures and student achievement. At least since the release of the Coleman report in 1966, there has been a vigorous debate as to whether increased funding leads to increased student achievement. The findings of the Coleman report and other similar studies suggest that public school funding increases yield little, if any, gains in student achievement. These research findings, however, are not without their limitations. These studies, by and large, have defined student achievement generally in terms of standardized test scores (Carr and Krueger 1992:1). Interestingly, when student achievement is measured in terms of post-education earnings, the results differ dramatically. There is a clear connection between school quality, as correlated with school expenditures, and student achievement. In fact, researchers have attributed much of the decrease in the difference between black-white earnings to increased quality of black schooling. Hence increased school funding, while not always easily connected to improved standardized test scores, clearly has positive implications for students' future income (Carr and Krueger 1992:2).

Moreover, despite earlier inconclusive or conflicting evidence, some recent research has substantiated a positive relationship between increased school funding and higher standardized test scores. A January 2001 *New York Times* article cites evidence that equitable school funding does factor heavily in attaining significant student achievement gains for urban students. Texas and Kentucky, two states whose funding formulas were declared unconstitutional in 1989, have made significant progress toward achieving the parity that court orders demanded. In both states, students in poor districts that received these increased funds have made remarkable gains in academic performance. In an urban section of Houston, for example, the percentage of students passing their "end-of-course" tests rose from 50.7 percent in 1994 to 80.6 percent in 2000. The independent research organization that analyzed the data cited the additional money as a significant factor in the student achievement gains (Steinberg 2001:B1). Similar results emerged from a very recent study of the efforts toward school funding equalization in Massachusetts. The researchers found that increased spend-

ing led to increased scores in math, reading, science, and social studies for fourth graders (Guryan 2001:21). Hence, an emerging body of literature seems to be challenging the consensus created by the findings of the Coleman report and other similar studies.

The issue of equalizing school funding, however, is not simply a question of the likelihood of student academic achievement; it is more importantly a matter of profound moral significance. The huge per-pupil spending differences between urban and suburban public schools make a troubling statement about how our society views the worth of human beings. Under this economic paradigm, human worth is drawn primarily along the lines of race and class.

A non-racist view of humanity demands that the equal essential worth of all persons is respected and reflected in the social, political, and economic structures of society. As King's insights suggest, the equal essential worth of all persons is not simply an abstract concept. It is inextricably linked to, and manifested in, the physical realities in which people are forced to live. The disparities in per-pupil spending in wealthy suburban schools and urban poor schools constitute a violation of the equal essential worth of all students. The legal sanctioning of this highly unequal distribution of public education, an essential social good, implies an inequality in American society's judgment about the worth of urban and suburban students. The only way to overcome this perversion in the judgment of human worth is to institute a more equitable system of public school finance that more accurately reflects the truly equal essential worth of all students. Any action short of this objective will only perpetuate the moral depravity underlying the current system of public education in America.

*Strengthening Affirmative Action and
Civil Rights Measures*

The American debate on the issue of equal educational opportunity has always been, and continues to be, inextricably linked to the problem and issue of race in America. Race is the most prominent social factor distinguishing urban school students from suburban school students. The historical development of the racial divide in public education reveals its roots in racist ideology and practices. A useful remedy to the existing inequalities, therefore, must account for and counter the patterns and systems of racism that perpetuate the problem.

After the civil rights movement, affirmative action and other civil rights measures became principal mechanisms for reversing the history of discrimination against African Americans, other minorities, and women. While these measures alone do not have the potential to fully counter racial injustice, they continue to be useful political and legal mechanisms in the struggle for racial justice.

One of the great achievements of affirmative action, in particular, and civil rights legislation, in general, is that they have created in the American consciousness an increased level of awareness of, and sensitivity to, the history and problem of United States racism. Not only have these measures helped to curb actual discrimination, they also have given rise to a moral ethos in which racist practices are viewed with moral condemnation, making it more difficult for individuals and institutions to be comfortable attempting to engage in such practices.

Hence the current trends toward reversing affirmative action and civil rights legislation threaten also to erode American moral consciousness on the matter of race and racism. The moral aim of these race-based initiatives—the realization of racial justice—is critically compromised by the dismantling of those social, political, and economic structures designed to achieve racial justice. The rolling back of affirmative action and other civil rights measures eliminates an important structural deterrent to racist systems and practices, which only feeds and facilitates the kind of racist resistance that opposes racial equity in public education.

In addition to affirmative action, Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides another example of civil rights legislation that needs to be preserved and strengthened as a tool for advancing the struggle for racial justice in public education. The intent of Title I is to provide federal grants to elementary and secondary schools to benefit the schooling of children from low-income families. This measure was created in an attempt to better equalize school funding throughout the United States. However, Title I funds, which amounted to 6.6 billion dollars in 1993, have come under the manipulation of the same political forces that perpetuate the current inequity in school resources. Rather than going solely to school districts in poor communities, these funds are often diverted to less needy schools. In fact, in 1993 approximately 90 percent of all American schools received Title I funds, suggesting that the intended goal of Title I funds is critically undermined by the political maneuvering of wealthier congressional districts. Ironically, Title I funds, which are designed to better equalize school funding across districts and states, are distributed far

more equitably across *all* school districts (including wealthy suburban districts) than the state funding distributions themselves (McUsic 1999:94). Protecting Title I funds from this kind of political manipulation and ensuring their distribution in only the poorest school districts will help in the effort to improve the quality of schooling for the most disadvantaged students.

In recent years, however, programs like affirmative action and Title I have come under severe attack. This opposition takes on various forms. One argument against these measures raises the question of their necessity. Often conservative critics of affirmative action, for example, argue that the race-related legislative and legal advances that have been made since *Brown v. Board of Education* make affirmative action policy initiatives “anachronistic” (Edley 1996:24–25). This view, however, is blind to the history and reality of American racism.

Clearly, the United States is far from achieving the reality of racial justice that affirmative action was intended to achieve. The black unemployment rate remains significantly higher than that among whites. The black median income is more than 25 percent lower than the white median income. Only one in seven white children under the age of six lives below the poverty level, while half the black children in this age range live their lives below the national poverty rate. These disparities are in large measure created and aggravated by the unequal education of black and white students that creates disparate job prospects for them as adults (Edley 1996:42–43).

Some will argue, of course, that these disparities are not necessarily caused by racial discrimination. Hence, in their view the anti-discrimination policies that emerged from the civil rights movement are unnecessary. However, evidence to the contrary discounts the credibility of this claim. As recently as 1996 the federal government was receiving more than 90,000 complaints of work-place discrimination each year. The Urban Institute’s *Employment and Housing Discrimination Studies* found startling patterns in both job and housing discrimination against blacks. In experiments conducted sending black and white job or housing applicants with identical credentials to the same employment or real estate institutions, the Institute found that 20 percent of white applicants advanced higher in the hiring process than an identically qualified black applicant. And in numerous cases realtors told blacks that no housing was available, yet only a day later showed available apartments to white clients with equal qualifications. Furthermore, the Institute’s research revealed that African Americans experience dis-

crimination in “roughly half” of their real estate search encounters (Edley 1996:49).

Even when black-white disparities cannot so easily be traced to such clear instances of racial discrimination, it is impossible to detach the racial divide from its relationship to the United States history of racial segregation and forced slavery. Even those who suggest that racism is not a systemic reality today are forced to admit that the black-white disparity has causal roots in the United States history of racial injustice against black people. Centuries of inhuman treatment cannot be overcome simply by three decades of civil rights legislation. Past practices of racial injustice continue to have crippling effects on the lives of African Americans far removed in time and space from those practices. In a very real way their destinies are constricted by the strains this nation’s history of racism has placed upon them. Hence current generations who continue to benefit from the unjust effects of historically rooted racism in America bear a moral responsibility to rectify these unjust conditions. It is within this frame of reference that the necessity of affirmative action and civil rights measures is clear.

In addition to the argument that denies the necessity of affirmative action, many opponents view these policies as constituting “reverse discrimination” that promotes racial preferences in favor of African Americans and other racial minorities. In this view the morality of such measures is called into question because of the discrimination that it promotes. Yet this perspective is not only guilty of historical amnesia, it is also guided by a myopic ethical vision.

The moral significance of affirmative action is not in the short-term “discrimination” that it involves. Rather the quality of its final aim determines its ethical status. Affirmative action is merely a means to achieve racial justice. Its relationship to the goal of racial justice determines its moral validity. Conversely, the racial discrimination that has created the *need* for affirmative action is undeniably linked to an ignoble telos, namely racial injustice and the perpetuation of white supremacy. Hence those who try to place affirmative action measures on the same moral plane with the racial discrimination that blacks have experienced are grossly mistaken in their moral reasoning because they fail to appreciate the diametrically opposed aims of the discrimination involved in racism versus that involved in affirmative action. Racism distinguishes humanity on the basis of race in order to exalt whites over blacks unjustifiably. Affirmative action distinguishes humanity on the basis of race in order to ensure that the essentially equal

human dignity of all people is respected. To invoke the language of Martin Luther King, Jr., affirmative action and civil rights laws attempt to “uplift human personality”—racism “degrades the human personality” (King 1986:49).

Aggressive Urban Renewal

Finally, as Jean Aynon rightly argues in her book *Ghetto Schooling: A Political Economy of Urban Educational Reform*, improving urban education will necessitate improving the social and economic conditions of the children and families in inner-city communities. As an extension of this claim, she suggests that school-based reform must be coupled with a wider reform and renewal of life in America’s urban centers. This will mean that urban school reform is structured into a larger effort to eliminate the acute poverty and alienation that characterize ghetto communities.

Essentially, there are two basic strands involved in this proposal for the renewal of urban centers. The first is to improve the quality of life for the poor who make up the highest percentage of inner-city dwellers. Second, efforts must be made to attract working- and middle-class Americans of all races back to the cities. These efforts are both interrelated and interdependent. The creation of jobs with livable wages, crime reduction, the construction of affordable and desirable housing, improved city services, access to health care, and the beautification of city homes and buildings are important dimensions to the renewal of city life and the success of city schools.

This two-dimensional approach to urban renewal coheres well with the view of humanity evident in King’s thought. Improving the quality of life for the inner-city poor speaks to the way King’s view of humanity connects the *worth* of the person to the *physical well-being* of the person. In King’s thought, a decent job and a basic level of prosperity are inextricably linked to human dignity. Hence a program of urban renewal that seeks to create the conditions for all persons to have a decent standard of living is a necessary practical extension of the ethical principle of the equal sacred worth of all persons.

Moreover, attracting working- and middle-class families back to the inner city also reflects a natural congruence with King’s view of humanity. First of all, the social, political, and economic implications of achieving this goal bear promising results for the quality of urban life and public educa-

tion. Under the conditions of racial and socio-economic diversity implied by this kind of urban renewal, urban schools would benefit from sharing in the economic and political resources that come with the presence of wealthier families. Moreover, this type of diversity reflects and reinforces the insight inherent in King's notion of the unity of humanity. By creating a context in which the education of the rich is tied up with the education of the poor and the schooling of black students is interdependent with the schooling of white students, we are made more acutely aware of the interrelatedness of all humanity. The separation of students along the lines of race and class betrays the truth of our real connectedness.

To be sure, the social impact of poor schooling has negative repercussions not only for children and families in troubled schools. We all suffer from, and pay for the effects of, the inadequate education of one segment of humanity. The costs of welfare dependency and incarceration, both of which are highly correlated with poor schooling, are only a portion of the costs that all of us absorb as a result of failing schools. A startling 82 percent of all persons in American prisons are high school dropouts. The estimated cost of incarcerating one male prisoner for a year is \$35,000. Some social scientists have suggested that the United States loses \$50 billion a year in earnings due to the high school dropout problem (Anyon 1997:182).

These daunting monetary costs cannot compare, of course, to the loss in human resources and potential that is caused by poor schooling. We will never know the intellectual loss that our nation has suffered as a result of its long and systemic miseducation of black and poor youth. The cure for AIDS may very well be planted in the mind of a little girl in the South Bronx, but it will never emerge because she has not been taught to read and cannot solve a simple math problem. It will take a vigorous renewal of, and reinvestment in, our inner cities to reverse the pattern of substandard schooling that prevents urban youth from fulfilling their potential and contributing fully to our society.

CONCLUSION

The political and economic challenges that confront the struggle for social justice in public education are enormous. Parents in predominantly white suburban communities are afraid that achieving equity for black students will mean that the education of their own children will suffer. Politicians are

afraid that if they talk about real systemic change on this issue they will lose the political support of their powerful suburban constituents. States fear that improving urban public schools will overburden their already dwindling resources. Everyone is aware that these inequalities represent a profound social problem, but these narrow personal and political concerns sap the momentum needed to solve this daunting social ill.

Hope for achieving equity in public education lies in our capacity to convince all the involved constituencies—politicians, wealthy suburban taxpayers, corporations, and urban residents—to encompass a larger concern for *all* school children, not merely their own children and self-interests. In a discussion of the nature of competing social groups, to which he refers as “moral communities,” Peter Paris warns that “human communities have no natural impulse to expand themselves in a morally just way.” Rather, the natural human instinct is to resist expanding one’s moral vision beyond the immediate moral community (Paris 1988:118–19). Widening moral communities comes about only through an active moral commitment to the wider common good. Hence the task of persuading social groups, such as those involved in the debate over education reform, to transcend their understandable, but myopic, self-interests will require cooperative human thought and action that is nurtured by a vision of the common good.

The view of humanity outlined in King’s thought provides a solid foundation for promoting such a commitment to the common good. His view of a *common humanity*, bound together by an equal essential worth, human unity, and freedom, offers a way of understanding the human condition that encourages and even requires a genuine concern for, and commitment to, the good of the other. Within this ethical framework, conflicts such as the public education crisis can be resolved only by formulating a solution that satisfies the needs of all concerned.

Finding this solution is a challenge we must not fail to undertake. Not only are the minds of millions of American youth at stake in this crisis, but the social, economic, and political vitality of the nation’s future also is at stake. Even more significantly, the moral integrity of our nation is on the line. Should we persist in our indifference to, and accommodation with, the “savage inequalities” that characterize the difference between urban and suburban public schooling, we simply perpetuate an ideology of racism and the mistaken view of humanity that it embodies. W. E. B. DuBois once wrote, “the school of today is the world of tomorrow” (1980:53). Our commitment to a better world, a world where racism and injustice are eradicated, is con-

tingent upon our commitment to achieving equal educational opportunities for all children. Hence, the most pressing question of the public education crisis must not be, “How can we afford to make schools work?” but rather, “How can we afford *not* to make schools work?”

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