

# KOINONIA

The Princeton Theological Seminary Graduate Forum

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## CONTENTS

Closing the Black-White Achievement Gap: A Public Theology for Public Education Reform RAY A. OWENS	1
Some Possible Roles for Congregational Christian Education in Closing the Black- White Educational Achievement Gap SANDRA COSTEN KUNZ	32
Justice, Pluralism, and School Choice: A Response to Ray Owens CHRISTOPHER S. D. ROGERS	44
Response to Mr. Owens' Paper MICAH WATSON	52
Pragmatism as Anti-Racism: A Response to Ray Owens DIANE WHITMORE	61
BOOK REVIEWS	120

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Response to Mr. Owens' Paper MICAH WATSON	52
Pragmatism as Anti-Racism: A Response to Ray Owens DIANE WHITMORE	61

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RACHEL SOPHIA BAARD 67

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CHRISTOPHER BEALL 71

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ADAM H. BECKER 73

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BRYAN D. BIBB 76

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ELIZABETH BLAKE 79

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STEPHEN BUTLER MURRAY 81

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DUSTIN W. ELLINGTON 84

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JENNIFER S. GREEN 86

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GLORY JOTHI THOMAS 88

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CHRISTOPHER LIBBY 90

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NÉSTOR MEDINA 93

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RETIEF MÜLLER 95

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JEFF NOWERS 98

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HYUNG JIN PARK 101

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MYRON A. PENNER 104

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AUSTRA REINIS 107

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AMY A. SLAGLE

112

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JASON A. SPRINGS

117

## EDITORIAL

In May of 2001 the *KOINONIA* editorial board selected Ray Owens' timely paper, "Closing the Black-White Achievement Gap: A Public Theology for Public Education Reform," as the centerpiece essay for our annual interdisciplinary forum held at Princeton Theological Seminary. In June of 2001 the board invited a diverse group of respondents to discuss public education reform from a variety of backgrounds and perspectives. By August of 2001 the October date for the Fall Forum was set in stone and all involved were looking ahead to a spirited and meaningful conversation. Then on September 11, 2001, the world suddenly changed and all our plans seemed inconsequential.

John Updike's words in the September 24, 2001, issue of *The New Yorker* best capture how many of us—especially those of us attempting to understand God's relation to these horrific events—felt on that day: "Suddenly summoned to witness something great and horrendous, we keep fighting not to reduce it to our own smallness." The editorial board was faced with a very difficult decision: Do we continue as planned with the Fall Forum? Do we postpone it to a later date? Or do we attempt to put together a forum addressing the current situation? The latter choice was dismissed right away. Without appropriate time for prayer, reflection, and discernment, no one wanted to rush headlong into a politically heated discussion on the events of September 11. Postponing the Fall Forum proved difficult since few, if any, fall dates remained available on the Seminary's master calendar (unless we re-christened the event the Spring Forum!). So in the end we made the choice to move ahead as planned. Public education reform was a pressing and relevant social issue prior to September 11. It is even more pressing post September 11, given the return to governmental deficit spending needed to sustain the "War on Terror."

Mr. Owens' essay is a critical response to two leading models of public education reform: the voucher system and charter schools. In effect, Mr. Owens argues that any reform that does not improve public education for *all* children is ethically suspect, since it fosters the long-standing inequities in school funding that can be traced to racist ideologies shaping social structures. Accordingly, any attempted reform that leaves our inner-city (primarily minority population) schools under-funded while creating more "choices" for suburban (primarily white) working and middle-class schools supports *de facto* segregation. One crucial issue underlying the black-white

achievement gap is inequitable funding for public schools. Perhaps, as respondent Diane Whitmore has argued, the pragmatic solution is to create equity by directing more funding to the most deprived school districts. However, what Ms. Whitmore fails to take into account is the second issue (as identified by Mr. Owens) underlying the black-white achievement gap . . . racism.

Critical race theory (CRT), a movement originating within legal scholarship but effecting broader societal impact, seeks to uncover how race and racial power is constructed and perpetuated by our system of laws. Coining the term “racialism” to describe structures and systems that (perhaps unintentionally) continue the practices of racial domination, CRT argues that “color-blindness” is a dangerous chimera. Thus, CRT takes issue with the traditional liberal position that favors abandoning race-consciousness in favor of a neutral, merit-based system for distributing resources and opportunities since “merit” is itself a contextually defined concept. The recognition that the “persistent problem of racism” is the result of historically contingent social and political struggles is the cornerstone of CRT: laws reflect social prejudices and are therefore major factors in the construction and reinforcement of racist structures. Therefore, Mr. Owens, in his analysis of the black-white education gap, suggests that social reform must begin “by dismantling the ideology of racism and the view of humanity it embodies” (3). The respondents adequately address the first issue identified by Owens—inequitable funding for public schools—yet, in my opinion, the second (perhaps central) issue of race remains largely unexplored.

In the first response to Ray Owens’ paper, Sandra Kunz explores the role of congregational Christian education as a resource for closing the black-white achievement gap. She begins by sharing a moving confession about the fear behind our attitudes toward education reform: fear that any attempt to change educational funding structures will take away vital resources from our own children. Ms. Kunz presents concrete and attainable goals for local congregations seeking to make a difference in public education and also rekindles hope in God’s “transformative power for good” (43). Christopher Rogers, in “Justice, Pluralism, and School Choice,” defends school vouchers and charter schools by drawing upon many of the same ethical and theological resources employed by Mr. Owens. In the end, he differs from Owens only insofar as he is willing to consider school choice programs as part of a broader program of educational reform.

Micah Watson's response challenges what he perceives to be the central weakness in Owens' article, namely that, given the lack of empirical evidence for or against school choice programs, and the long history of failure by the current public education system, Owens is too quick to dismiss the possibility that such reforms could possibly lead to broader and more equitable school funding. In Mr. Watson's words, "it is unclear why Mr. Owens sticks with an institution that for its existence has grossly failed the African American community" (57). Finally, Diane Whitmore presents strong empirical evidence that public policy seeking to overcome the black-white achievement gap in education should allocate increased funding for deprived schools since cost-benefit analysis suggests that investment in early education "more than pays for itself in increased future wages for small-class students and decreased social costs associated with a reduction in teen pregnancy and crime" (65). Unfortunately, public policy is rarely decided solely by pragmatic considerations. As with most scientific models, a cost-benefit analysis is extremely reductionist and does not adequately account for the myriad social and cultural forces (including racial prejudice) competing for the same limited resources.

All our contributors bring valuable insights to the discussion. In fact, their participation in the Fall Forum validated the editorial board's decision to hold the forum in spite of the events of September 11. It proved to be one of *KOINONIA*'s best-attended public forums, and members of the Princeton Theological Seminary faculty voiced their opinion that it was one of the best public forums ever held at the Seminary. Yet, in the discussion that followed, the issue of race was glossed over and made to seem part of America's pre-civil rights past instead of a prevalent force in the formation of current school funding policies. Sadly, this is the most telling reality of racism: its ability to continue to shape our beliefs and actions in spite of our best intentions because we are all inheritors of and participants in racist structures. Enjoy this issue. It is a true labor of love, put together during a difficult time, yet made possible by everyone's commitment to public education. One final note: these essays are not offered as pre-packaged solutions, but as humble contributions to an ongoing conversation about a problem that confronts each and every one of us. Our hope is that this issue will inspire your own contributions to the discussion.

RUBÉN ROSARIO RODRÍGUEZ  
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

