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*Freedom Rider  
Education Apartheid Lives On  
by Margaret Kimberley*

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We haven't even lived up to the promises of Plessey v. Ferguson. American schools today are separate and no one would even pretend they're equal. Every expert has a new plan for creating successful segregated schools, and the white society loves to hear these stories because they let them off the hook completely.

Campaign commercials for New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg claim that public schools have improved under his stewardship. The ads tell us that test scores have risen and "social promotion" has ended. This claim is supposed to convince New Yorkers to cast votes for Bloomberg because higher test scores and fourth graders being "left back" are supposed to be good things.

In fact, the opposite is true. The end of "social promotion" via test results is a sign of educational failure that is visited primarily upon children of color. Testing is a financial boon to the companies that produce the tests. It is of little value to teachers forced to teach to the test or to the children who are forced to take them.

The colossal scam brings with it failures that are touted as successes. The children who are not allowed to pass into the next grade are also conveniently not allowed to take the high stakes test. If the most challenged students can't take the test, it is inevitable that scores will rise. Children are being used as political pawns in order to make politicians look good with tales of rising test scores.

What Bloomberg doesn't tell us in his commercials is that the state of New York is under court order to remedy discrepancies in public school funding. New York City spends \$8,171 per student, while its suburbs spend an average of \$12,613 per student. Some New York City suburbs spend as much as \$17,000 per student. Republican governor George Pataki continues to defy court orders to replace the current funding system. His foot dragging is a declaration that voters who live in majority white school districts will continue to have better public schools.

Jonathan Kozol has spent decades chronicling the racially motivated inequities in American education. In his latest book on the subject, "The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America," Kozol paints a well-documented picture of the decision to segregate educational advantage for white

America.

Kozol points out that court ordered mandates to change school funding formulas rarely lead to change. New York is not alone in acting like southern states who used every trick in the book to challenge Brown v. Board of Education. New York political leadership have acted like their counterparts across the nation and steadfastly refused to comply with the law.

One year ago the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education produced endless news stories but very little enlightened discussion about the state of American education. We can thank, or rather blame, one Brown v. Board celebration for giving us the mean spirited and incoherent rants of Bill Cosby. Bill Cosby, Ed.D. has not seen fit to say anything about the deliberate effort to deprive black children of the resources they need in their schools.

The sad fact is that black children continue to be short changed educationally across the country. White Americans have decided that their children will get a bigger piece of the pie and they have no intention of sharing their slices. It all makes sense, in a twisted kind of way. You can't maintain superiority without maintaining superior access to educational opportunities.

Superiority also can't be maintained without propaganda directed at those who are getting the shaft. In the case of public education, black people have been told that discrepancies in black student achievement are our fault solely, that having money won't help our children. Privileged people who make money their God tell the rest of us that we don't need any of it.

We just need to behave better, improve our values, get married, stay out of jail, etc. It is certainly not advisable to go to jail or choose unemployment, but it is a bold faced lie to say that education isn't better in districts that have more cash to spend. White suburbanites have so far neglected to share any of the school district money they claim is so worthless.

The Campaign for Fiscal Equity (CFE), the organization that filed the suit against New York State, points out an obvious problem that keeps black children on the educational bottom:

"Throughout this report...we document a dismaying alignment of disadvantaged students (disproportionately children of color), schools with the poorest educational resources (fiscal and human), and substandard achievement. Conversely, we find that those schools that serve the fewest at-risk children have the greatest financial resources, teachers with the best credentials, and the highest level of achievements. Perhaps the sharpest contrasts exist between public schools in New York City and those in districts (most suburban) with low percentages of students in poverty and high levels of income and property wealth." – State of Learning, CFE report, July 2003

It really isn't shocking that America's public school systems remain segregated. Education does not differ from any other institution in the country that gives unfair advantage to those endowed with wealth and higher incomes.

We are constantly condemned for not pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps. Of course, we don't have boots, and the people who do didn't pull themselves up from them. They got boots from their parents. If their boots were self-made they got them because politicians made sure their schools had more than enough.

The plight of black America in public education is consistent with our plight in every other arena. Shortages of wealth and income, political power, and good political leadership conspire to prevent us from succeeding as individuals and as a group, and it all begins as soon as we learn our ABCs.

## The Black Commentator – Freedom Rider: Education Apartheid Lives On

*Margaret Kimberley's Freedom Rider column appears weekly in **BC**. Ms. Kimberley is a freelance writer living in New York City. She can be reached via e-Mail at [margaret.kimberley@blackcommentator.com](mailto:margaret.kimberley@blackcommentator.com). You can read more of Ms. Kimberley's writings at [freedomrider.blogspot.com](http://freedomrider.blogspot.com).*