

Against All Odds

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, May 19, 2004

In a case that roiled the nation, pitting neighborhoods against each other, the Supreme Court ruled 50 years ago that segregated schools are unconstitutional. Despite the promises inherent in that landmark ruling, many of our children are failing. Or rather, we're failing our children.

Brown v. Board of Education ushered in an era of tumultuous change. It also sparked an angry backlash. As integration plans were implemented and students bused across town, whites yanked their kids from urban public schools and put them in suburban or private ones. That social upheaval was fed more by fear than reason.

The fiercest days of animosity are over. But the ruling hasn't solved the problem of unequal education; poor and minority children suffer most. Look at the numbers. The Department of Education reports that only 44 percent of Latino fourth graders read at a basic level or better, compared to 75 percent of the whites. A federal test last year showed black and Hispanic seniors reading and calculating at the level of white eighth graders.

Not surprisingly, test scores show that the poorest districts have the worst schools. These teachers are faced with homeless students, drug dealers, and teen-age alcoholics. Choices are sometimes based less on learning and more on survival.

Rich or poor, children depend on teachers. On the frontlines every day, teachers motivate, inspire, and coach even the toughest kids-or fail even the most gifted. It's not easy to recruit the best. Salaries are typically lower than market rates. Women who may have become teachers thirty years ago have more options today. Classes can be unruly, teacher training uneven. And far fewer teachers apply to the poorest districts, although those schools need the most help.

As hard as it is to recruit and keep good teachers, it's even harder to get rid of bad ones.

When an instructor is accused of incompetence, teacher unions and administrators are usually at odds, creating a hostile atmosphere. New York City papers report that a chemistry teacher who performed poorly at three different schools has been waiting 12 out of the past 15 years for administrative hearings. On full salary for those dozen years, he's earned approximately \$600,000 from the city for doing absolutely nothing. In the midst of the wrangling, it's the child who loses most.

But in Toledo, Ohio, a struggling mill town in America's rust belt, teachers and administrators have decided to work together to initiate reform. In fact, it was the union that suggested an intervention program where teachers are mentored and evaluated by their peers. These "consulting" teachers give struggling colleagues support and guidance. If teachers can't make the grade, they're let go. If they improve, they stay. And student test scores are rising.

The Toledo school system weeds out about eight percent of its new teachers each year. So far, none of the cases has gone to court. Intervention saves money, but more importantly, it creates a collegial atmosphere among educators as one mentors another. "It changes the entire culture of teaching," says Linda Kaboolian, director of the Labor-Management Program at Harvard. "It gives teachers responsibility for not only their own classes, but also their neighbor's down the hall."

Not surprisingly, the "peer intervention" program is catching on nationwide.

Collaboration between the teachers' union and school administrators is the best form of leadership, says Kaboolian. She says unions often get a "bum rap," since they're required to represent even the worst teachers. But it was also the teacher's union in Hartford, Connecticut that encouraged administrators to adopt "Success for All," an innovative curriculum that helps teachers teach kids to read. In what was once considered a doomed school system, test scores improved more in the first six months than in the previous four years combined. In Cerritos, California, the union initiated a similar program to close the achievement gap between white and Latino children.

Kaboolian says Hartford and Cerritos are becoming "models of school reform," based on the hard-won cooperation between union and management. As a former union officer and negotiator as well as a manager, she knows the downside of battles between school boards and teachers. We hear more than enough stories about union strikes, picket lines, and salary demands-or cheap, heartless management. We rarely hear of two sides coming together to create a win-win. But that's exactly what we need to close our country's achievement gap. Fifty years overdue, I'd say.