

## **Breaking down color barriers: Louisville needs diversity in housing, schools**

Originally Published in the Courier Journal-December 12, 2010

For Louisville to be truly “Possibility City,” our leaders need to look more creatively at what lies ahead. Today’s youth will come of age in an increasingly diverse society. The Census Bureau predicts that the white population will no longer be the majority by 2042 as the U.S. grows and changes.

As Jefferson County’s current crop of schoolchildren become adults, they will need to know how to live and work with people different from themselves. Yet school desegregation has been this community’s only major policy that recognizes and addresses this change. In light of its importance, the recent decision of the school board to replace Superintendent Berman is a sad commentary on how fragile our schools’ achievements are.

Taking recent rankings about a handful of failing local schools at face value, getting those students on track will need to be a top priority for the next Jefferson County Public Schools superintendent. The school district’s leader should not also have to shoulder the sole responsibility for modeling and teaching diversity to local youth.

Over 30 years ago, the U. S. Supreme Court stated that “one vehicle can carry only a limited amount of baggage” — acknowledging that it will take a multi-dimensional approach to combat racial segregation. Our focus should be on desegregating housing as well as schools. The Court reneged on that approach three years ago in the Seattle and Louisville school integration decisions. The narrow reasoning that was at the core of those decisions pervades our local decision-making now.

“Possibility City” can do better. That is why we advocate complementary housing policies to support and extend what JCPS has been doing virtually alone for 35 years. In a community in which racial and economic segregation and isolation are otherwise rampant, the burden on schools alone to teach and model diversity for our diverse future is simply too great. Instead of undoing the inclusiveness we have achieved, why not supplement the school district’s efforts with policies that promote more diverse housing patterns?

The school desegregation plan that started widespread local busing caused quite an uproar — pro- and con — when it was implemented in 1975. But it slowly gained the community’s support. Bolstered by Kentucky’s Education Reform Act in 1990, JCPS consistently improved its quality by both state and national standards. In a proud moment for this city, the Harvard University Civil Rights Project in 2003 pronounced ours the most desegregated school district in the nation.

All that progress was thrown into question in 2007 when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down the district’s popular voluntary assignment plan for its use of race in student placement. Ever since, the district has scrambled to meet the Court’s stricter guidelines while maintaining

continuity for students and its longstanding commitment to racially and economically integrated schools.

Even in “Possibility City,” that has been an increasingly uphill battle, especially since the U.S. economy tanked in 2008. Everyone from state senators to local judges has weighed in this fall on the problems with JCPS busing. They point to the initial, few, highly problematic late deliveries of young children the first days of school, which have since been rectified by JCPS.

While quick to throw stones, critics have been slow to suggest practical solutions for how to maintain both the quality and the diversity our local school system has stood for over several decades.

These community critics fail to mention a very basic and troubling reality about Louisville schools. It is simply not possible to advocate for “neighborhood schools” or even reduced busing in a community as racially segregated as metro Louisville without reinstating segregation because our neighborhoods are not integrated.

Perhaps there are a few who would like to roll back the gains of the 20th-century civil rights movement. But most Louisvillians have no desire to return to the policies of a highly discriminatory past, in which non-white citizens were confined to inferior schools, jobs, and lives. And all concerned with quality education must realize that any policy that does not account for our growing diversity will be short-lived, ignominious and costly to our community.

One solution to the need for mass busing is to advance housing policies that can complement and strengthen the diversity that Jefferson County schools have maintained for decades. Only this course of action might allow for a closing of the remaining achievement gap, a gradual reduction in busing and — over time — increased opportunities for neighborhood schools that would look forward to the multicultural society ahead of us and not behind us to our segregated and discriminatory past. As long ago as 1975, at the advent of busing, this solution was proposed by Galen Martin, then director of the Human Rights Commission of Kentucky. Sadly, it has never received serious consideration.

Housing policy in Louisville has been singularly silent on promoting neighborhoods of diverse housing types, diverse families and diverse people. Affordable housing is a key to quality schooling for all, most education and housing reformers agree. Yet in metro Louisville, affordable housing has never had a full hearing. Only 6 percent of the county is zoned to accommodate multi-family housing, a situation that limits opportunity for working families, worsens segregation of various kinds and makes excellent school outcomes for all unattainable.

Why not take a lesson from nearby Nashville? Or from Montgomery County, Maryland, one of the nation’s most acclaimed school districts and site of some of the most inclusive zoning policies anywhere in the U.S.? Since 1976, Montgomery County has mandated that all residential development include affordable housing. A recent study showed that not only do the children of low-income families residing in those units show improved academic performance, but that inclusionary zoning has been a valuable tool for integrating the schools.

Learning to live in an increasingly diverse United States is something that all generations have had to do since this country was founded. An understanding of this need is reflected in our local public schools, whose assignment plan and leadership need support, not condemnation and dismantling. It's time for our housing policies to reflect this reality too. More affordable and fair housing would make our schools, our city and our economic future stronger.

Catherine Fosl is director of University of Louisville's Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research. Cathy Hinko is executive director of the Metropolitan Housing Coalition, and Cedric Merlin Powell, is a professor at the Brandeis School of Law at the University of Louisville.

Editor's note: This article was co-signed by the following people:

*Melissa Allen, enforcement board member, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Steven C. Bourassa, University of Louisville Department of Urban and Public Affairs; Karen L. Christopher, University of Louisville Departments of Women's and Gender Studies and Sociology; Khalilah Collins, director, Women in Transition; Amber G. Duke, University of Louisville Anne Braden Institute for Social Justice Research; Shannon Garth-Rhodes, JCPS teacher; Reginald Glass, enforcement board member, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Ira Grupper, advocacy board, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Carol Hanchette, University of Louisville Department of Geography and Geosciences; Lisa J. Houston, broker, LJH Infinity Realtors; J. Blaine Hudson, dean, University of Louisville College of Arts & Sciences; Alicia Hurle, University of Louisville student; Tracy E. K'Meyer, University of Louisville Department of History; Christopher Kolb, School of Liberal Studies, Spalding University.*

*Also: Andrea Koven, advocacy board, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Lisa H. Nicholson, Brandeis School of Law; Carol C. Norton, University of Louisville Environmental Finance Center and Center for Environmental Policy and Management; David S. Owen, University of Louisville Department of Philosophy and Director of Diversity Programs for the College of Arts and Sciences; Shameka Parrish-Wright, advocacy board, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Joshua I. Poe, University of Louisville student; Suzanne Post, director emeritus, Metropolitan Housing Coalition; Prafula P. Sheth, advocacy board, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Curtis Stauffer, MA, Metropolitan Housing Coalition; Judge Toni Stringer, Enforcement Board member, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Ibrahim B. Syed, Enforcement Board member, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission; Drew Tucker, University of Louisville student, Women in Transition; Enid Trucios-Haynes, Brandeis School of Law; John W. Vick, Center for Environmental Policy and Management, University of Louisville School of Urban and Public Affairs; Margath Walker, University of Louisville Department of Geography and Geosciences; Dawn J. Wilson, advocacy board, Louisville Metro Human Relations Commission.*