Diversity the key to helping students develop core values

by Marc_H._Morial

Just in time for the school year's end, the U.S. Supreme Court is poised to decide on two school-assignment plans used to voluntarily maintain racial integration in Seattle and Louisville, Ky., possibly taking the nation back to the days before Brown v. Board of Education, the landmark decision that deemed segregated schools unconstitutional because they violated the equal protection clause of the U.S. Constitution. The decision served to launch the civil rights movement.

In the more than 50 years after the momentous ruling, the United States is still not completely integrated - even in the public schools. But the nation has made some progress, thanks in part to voluntary integration plans in which localities opposed to federal authorities determine how to prevent schools from resegregating.

The two cases that have prompted the high court's recent review, Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1 and Meredith v. Jefferson County Board of Education et al., were filed by two individual students denied their first choice of schools because their enrollment would upset the racial balance. The plaintiffs contend that local school officials relied too heavily on race in determining admission.

Should the Supreme Court overturn decisions made by two lower courts, it will establish an adverse precedent that would probably force hundreds of school districts nationwide to revise or even dismantle similar efforts. That could possibly lead to a mass resegregation, which is the last thing our nation needs if we hope to close the educational achievement gap that exists between minority and white students nationwide.

In an amicus brief we filed with the court in October, the National Urban League informed the court that "it would be a fallacy to suggest that by not considering race at all - i.e. by ignoring de facto neighborhood segregation - the Seattle School District would somehow be acting in a 'race-neutral' fashion when a return to a school system that does not take race into account would mean that the schools would be distinguished solely by race."

Districts that have implemented "race-neutral" school assignment plans after having used race as a factor have seen reversals in their integration efforts. For example, in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district in North Carolina, the number of segregated schools jumped from 47 to 97 after the district implemented a race-neutral plan in 2002. The number of schools with more than 90 percent minority enrollment more than doubled.

In late 2006 when the high court heard oral arguments for the Seattle and Louisville cases, the New York Times' Linda Greenhouse suggested that "there seemed little prospect" that both school-assignment programs would "survive the hostile scrutiny of the court's new majority." One or the other - or both - appeared headed for being struck down, she wrote in a December story.

In 2005, the high court refused to review a similar school-assignment plan in Massachusetts, thanks in part to moderate now-retired Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, who was replaced by the more conservative Justice Samuel A. Alito Jr.

With Alito on board, the court is much more likely to view such programs with a very critical eye.

"The debate among the justices was over whether measures designed to maintain or achieve integration should be subjected to the same harsh scrutiny to which Brown v. Board of Education subjected the regime of official segregation. In the view of the conservative majority, the answer was yes," Greenhouse observed.

Ample research has shown that students, especially minorities, thrive in integrated schools compared to their counterparts in majority-minority schools. Diversity is key to helping students - future voting citizens of this nation - develop core democratic values and an appreciation for a wide range of viewpoints. The more isolated they are from other populations the less likely they are going to tolerate diverse points of view. And that is just a recipe - if taken to extremes - for political and social upheaval in a democracy that prides itself on being a melting pot.

As The New York Times pointed out in a December editorial, the federal government, which championed integration during the civil rights era, has lent its support for the cases encouraging resegregation. How ironic is that?

Let us just hope the U.S. Supreme Court doesn't fall prey to the same hypocrisy and uses equal protection as a reason to resegregate our nation's schools.

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