Achievement, Race, and Urban School Reform in Historical Perspective: Three Views from Detroit[1]

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No problem affecting US urban schools during the twentieth and now into the twenty-first century has proved more pervasive, persistent, and intractable than that of low academic achievement. Proposals to reform urban schools during this period can more often than not trace their impetus to any of a number of concerns surrounding the low academic performance and resulting failure of this or that segment of the student population of big city school systems. Such apprehension has expressed itself in different ways ranging from concerns about the growing presence within urban classrooms of children perceived to be difficult to teach and troublesome to manage to disputes over the supposed unequal treatment of poor and minority children. And misgivings about low achievement have affected a host of individuals and groups including school leaders and teachers, local and state politicians, parents, ordinary citizens, and students themselves.

The public schools of Detroit, Michigan represent a case in point. During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the efforts of Detroit's school administrators to provide for a growing and more diverse school population resulted in the introduction of a differentiated curriculum. Believing that a large portion of this new student population was less intellectually inclined and less capable than previous generations of students, these school leaders promoted differentiation as a way of channeling children of different abilities to distinct courses of study. These programs, some academic and preparatory and others vocational and terminal, led to decidedly different and unequal occupational and social destinies.

At mid-century the concern about low achievement took a different form as the city's growing black population challenged the authority of the largely white administrators and teachers who held sway over the city's schools. Black Detroiters claimed that the schools that their children were attending, which were often racially segregated, were not providing the

same quality of education that was being offered to the city's white children. The resulting dispute surrounding the achievement of Detroit's black youth served as an impetus for African Americans to define their own educational vision apart from that of the city's white school leaders and represented a major contributor to the pattern of racial discord that characterized Detroit and much of the rest of urban America during the 1960s and 1970s.

By the end of the century, Detroit's landscape had changed. The impact of the demographic and economic changes that had been affecting US cities since the end of World War II had transformed Detroit into a majority African American city with a black-led political apparatus. Black control of the schools, however, did not lessen the achievement problems affecting children attending the city's schools. If anything, the problem seemed greater and less amenable to improvement and resulted in a successful movement on the part of the State of Michigan to reorganize Detroit's schools through a mayoral takeover of the board of education. In this essay, I will explore these three moments in the history of Detroit's public schools to consider what they tell us about the role that concerns over academic achievement and race have played in our effort to reform urban schools.

Curriculum Differentiation in Detroit

Not unlike other big city school systems, Detroit made its first attempts to address problems of low achievement as one phase of a larger curriculum reform movement among urban school administrators in the years around the turn of the twentieth century. Their goal was to link the programs that the schools offered to the task of preparing a growing and increasingly diverse student body for their adult work and citizenship roles. This was a period of rapid enrollment growth in Detroit and in other large American cities. Between 1900 and 1920, the city's school population in grades kindergarten through twelfth increased from 29,401 to 115,389, a rate of growth of almost 300 per cent. By 1920, almost half of these students were foreign born or the children of foreign born parents.[2]

As many educators of the day saw it, a large portion of this new student population was less intellectually inclined and less capable than previous generations of students. They went on to argue that these students required a course of study that was less abstract than the existing curriculum, which was organized around the traditional disciplines of knowledge and allegedly did not address the practical needs and day-to-day concerns of youth. Consequently, these reformers championed a differentiated curriculum that channeled students to courses and programs that were thought to match their abilities, interests, and inclinations.[3] In his

1896 report to the Detroit Board of Education, Milton Whitney, Principal of the Truant School, noted how the differentiation that the existence of his school provided served to reconcile the general interests of the entire city with the specific needs of troubled youth. 'We are saving the city and state thousands of dollars that would have to be spent to prosecute the boys, criminals in after years, and support them in some of the state penal institutions at a cost far exceeding the amount spent in maintaining this school'. At the same time, however, the existence of the Truant School meant that the city was 'saving many of these boys from becoming criminals in after years'.[4]

Something of a consensus around the principle of differentiation quickly emerged in early twentieth century urban school systems. It was at the heart of an almost implicit accord that urban school leaders established among themselves as they sought to accommodate a growing and increasingly diverse school population. Curriculum differentiation would allow urban school leaders to remain true to the nineteenth century common school ideal of universal access to free education, the bedrock of public education in the United States, while at one and the same time serving the specialized needs of certain segments of the school population. With a differentiated curriculum in place, urban public schools could be accessible to all children. Once inside the school, however, these children would not necessarily enjoy a shared educational experience. Rather they would be channeled to an array of different programs and courses of study on the basis of their distinct interests, inclinations, and abilities.[5]

In his 1904 report to the Detroit Board of Education, Superintendent Wales C. Martindale pointed to this new direction in the curriculum when he called for the introduction of courses in the upper elementary grades that would 'appeal to practical people by [their] combination of traditional subjects with useful training in business practice'. With respect to mathematics, for example, Martindale suggested that there should be some alternative to the academic orientation of existing courses. Students, he went on to say, 'would be given a somewhat different line of arithmetic containing more business practice and measurement than the other; there would be work in elementary bookkeeping and business composition and the making of business forms would be strongly emphasized'.[6]

During the next two decades, Detroit educators inaugurated a number of curriculum changes in this direction. In 1922, again looking at mathematics, the city introduced content into the upper elementary grades that considered what school officials referred to as the 'civic phases of arithmetic'. The resulting units of instruction examined mathematical content in relation to the Disarmament Conference of 1921, the post office, thrift, and city government.[7] At about the same time, city school

officials created new courses in English, general science, mathematics, and social studies, in which the existing subject matter was made more practical, thereby adjusting it to the differing ability levels of students.

Several of these efforts at modifying Detroit's curriculum were explicitly directed toward so-called low-achieving students. In 1925, a study was conducted to see if the mathematical achievement of third grade children with low intelligence could be enhanced by allowing them to use a second grade arithmetic text. At the same time, a second study was also carried out to see if combining reading and arithmetic instruction could improve the achievement of children with low ability.[8] And three years later, a committee of high school mathematics teachers developed a specific course for students who were labeled as slow learners.[9]

True to the principles of curriculum differentiation, this enterprise sought to accommodate children with deficits in academic achievement and social behavior in special schools and classes as well as in regular classrooms with a modified and often simplified course of study. Such an approach was especially useful in this situation because it offered school administrators a way of resolving the conflict that they faced between their commitment to ensure that schools were accessible to children who were difficult to teach and troublesome to manage and their desire to minimize the disruption that the presence of such students brought to the progress of the regular classroom.[10]

A good example of one such program for children with learning difficulties was the Special Grade Room that was established at Eastern High School in the Fall of 1928, to provide for students who were currently failing in their academic work. Students were assigned to this class, according to the teacher, Elizabeth Coolidge, because they did not seem interested in school, could not function well in larger classes, or had experienced situations outside of school that interfered with their academic progress. Enrolling fewer students than other classes at Eastern, the Special Grade Room offered a less distracting environment and the opportunity for closer attention from the teacher.[11] The next two decades would see many similar initiatives, particularly in the areas of reading and mathematics, to provide for low-achieving children.[12]

The Great Depression of the 1930s and the economic fluctuations preceding it appear to have given impetus to these efforts to adjust the curriculum to problems of varying student achievement. The decline of available employment opportunities for adolescents in Detroit, beginning in the late 1920s and continuing with some up and down shifts throughout the 1930s, brought both large increases in the number of students entering the city's high schools as well as ensuring that they would remain there for longer periods of time. If the economic circumstances had been better, the

city's school officials believed that these young people would have found jobs and left school without earning a high school diploma. Faced with large numbers of students who they thought to be less capable, high school administrators pushed forward efficiency oriented curriculum changes as a means of designing a more practical and less rigorous course of study that such students could pursue with some hope of success.[13]

They were able, in this regard, to introduce a number of new courses that students enrolled in the high school's least academically oriented program, the general curriculum, could take to meet graduation requirements. In lieu of existing courses in laboratory science, these students could take new descriptive science courses that were organized around the day-to-day concerns of youth and did not include laboratory work. Similarly, these students could substitute a current events course, entitled Problems in American Life, for the government and economic courses required of students in other tracks. These and other similar courses focused on such practical issues as finding a job, healthy living, and interpersonal relationships instead of on traditional academic content.[14]

What differentiation meant as a reform strategy for Detroit becomes clear when we look at its impact over time on the city's growing African American population. In 1921, blacks constituted about 4.4 per cent of the school population. Twenty-five years later in 1946, they represented 17.3 per cent. By 1961, Detroit's school enrollment was almost half black and two years later it was majority black.[15] A dispute between the Parents Club at the city's all black McMichael Junior High School and city school officials in March of 1958 points to how curriculum differentiation affected Detroit's black students. The school, according to Parents Club President Oscar Dotson, was not an academically demanding school. It lacked adequate equipment to support the curriculum, and there was no clear disciplinary policy. What concerned Dotson the most, however, was the curriculum. He was concerned that there were not sufficient science courses at the school for entering ninth grade students, that those who were able to take science used a pamphlet instead of a regular text, and that students enrolled in English were not encouraged, as were students in other city junior high schools, to buy the standard English textbook.[16]

Reacting to these complaints, Arthur McGrath, Detroit's Deputy Superintendent for junior and senior high schools, indicated that any differences in the curriculum offered at McMichael and other schools was the result of the fact that students entering the school were not prepared to undertake junior high school level work.[17] The school's principal, Luther Hail, agreed. Teachers at McMichael, he noted, used an array of information, including achievement and I.Q. test results, reading scores,

and teacher ratings to group students for instruction. Their goal, in his words, was to 'take the children along as fast as they will go' and toward that end 'to adjust the work to meet a student's need'. He went on to say that the challenge facing teachers at the school was that many students were not ready for junior high work. There were, he noted, five sections of seventh graders at McMichael. Of those sections, one was for the more able students while the remainder were for low-achieving students. He explained the use of different texts from those available at other schools on the grounds that it was often necessary to adjust course materials to the students' abilities.[18] For Detroit's school leaders curriculum differentiation seemed to offer them a way to meet what they saw as the particular needs of black students. For the city's black citizens, however, a differentiated curriculum meant an inadequate and unequal education for their children.

The Northern High School Walkout

The transformation of Detroit's Northern high school from a mixed black and Jewish school during the mid 1930s to an almost exclusively black high school by the beginning of the 1960s offers another example of how curriculum differentiation affected the city's African American population.[19] In 1940, Northern offered 25 mathematics classes of which 19 were college preparatory and six were not. Nine years later the balance had shifted and about half of the school's 28 mathematics classes were college preparatory and half were terminal with many of those being remedial. And during the 1964–65 academic year, Northern offered 35 college preparatory mathematics classes and 64 classes that were terminal.[20]

And paralleling these changes was a reduction in the number of the school's students attending college. In 1936, for example, Northern's accreditation report noted that of the school's 598 graduates that year, 206 indicated that they had enrolled in college. Ten years later, the report identified 65 of the school's 548 graduates as immediately entering college. In 1956, only ten of the 297 graduates went directly on to college, and in 1960, 16 of 420 graduates were attending college after leaving Northern.[21] A differentiated curriculum, then, had the effect of limiting the opportunity that Northern offered its students.

The anger of black Detroiters about the quality of education that their children were receiving, not only at Northern but throughout the city, became apparent when on 7 April 1966, some 2,300 Northern students responded to Superintendent Samuel Brownell's decision to close the school in anticipation of a student protest by walking out in mass and joining a group of parents who had congregated on the street in front of the school. For the next two hours, the students and parents marched around the school carrying picket signs that decried the education offered

at Northern and shouted for the removal of the principal, Arthur Carty.[22] What followed was a three-week boycott during which time the student leaders of the walkout pressed their demands for a host of changes at the school including the removal of the principal.

The precipitating event behind the Northern boycott was the refusal of the head of the English Department, Thomas Scott, with the support of the principal, some two weeks before the walkout, to allow publication in the student newspaper of an editorial critical of the school and the education it offered Detroit's black youth. Written by a senior honors student, Charles Colding, and entitled 'Educational Camouflage', the article pointed to the failure of urban schools like Northern to provide a quality education. Colding decried such practices as social promotion, which he claimed was responsible for the low-achievement of black students at Northern. He argued that the underachievement of Northern students when compared with the performance of students in such largely white Detroit schools as Redford High was unacceptable. Finally, he blamed conditions at Northern, which he asserted were not accidental, on segregation and on what he claimed was the widespread belief among Detroit educators that 'Negroes aren't as capable of learning as whites'.[23]

The Northern protest was one instance of this longstanding conflict between black Detroiters and the largely white school authorities over the education that the city offered its African American children. The most detailed statements of black dissatisfaction with Northern were the essays that students attending the Freedom School, an alternative school set up at St. Joseph's Episcopal Church during the walkout, wrote describing the problems at the school. Several essays noted that teachers at Northern did not care about and in fact disliked African Americans. As one student put it, Northern teachers 'look and teach down to Negro students'. In the words of another student, teachers at the school believed that 'black boys and girls don't want to learn, so therefore they don't put much in their jobs'. The principal fared no better in their assessment. Carty, they stated, did not know what was going on at Northern. Nor did he care. They felt that he ran the school like a 'dictatorship' and that he was 'not for the Negro'. One essay made the point that it was assumed that African American students were 'willing to accept anything, the leftovers, and this is what we are given at Northern'. In summary, as one student put it, 'everything at Northern is either inferior, incompetent, or an injustice'. Parents of Northern students and black community leaders offered similar assessments of the school in the days following the walkout.[24]

On the other side of the controversy stood Arthur Carty, Northern's principal, who saw things quite differently. He was critical of Colding's editorial and had told the school's English Department chair that Colding

'doesn't have his facts'. As Carty saw it, the school offered its students an appropriate educational program. 'We have all the courses they need here, if the kids want to take them'. Whatever problems existed at Northern, he argued, had nothing to do with the school but were the result of the lack of student motivation coupled with poor parental involvement. 'I have', he noted, 'preached in churches and gone to block club after block club trying to persuade parents their children should work up to their full potential'. Yet, very few parents took the time, he pointed out, to visit the school or attend school meetings.[25]

The Northern walkout occurred in the midst of an important transition in black thinking in Detroit. Prior to the walkout black Detroiters held a divided educational vision. There were those who supported the continuation of a differentiated curriculum if it ensured opportunity for blacks. In May of 1967, a number of residents from the neighborhood surrounding Northeastern High School appeared before the board of education to protest the decision of an administrative committee to close the school's machine shop and substitute in its place courses in gardening, landscaping, and institutional housekeeping. What upset community residents was the fact that these proposed courses were terminal in nature and would not allow students who took them to continue their education after high school. They were also troubled by their belief that students completing these courses would have difficulty finding employment in an industrial city like Detroit. These black Detroiters were not opposed to the existence of a vocational curriculum. They did, however, want a curriculum that would produce skilled and semi-skilled workers among the city's African American population.[26]

Still other blacks wanted a more academically oriented education for their children, which they claimed was available to the city's white children. In October of 1966, the newly established Higgenbotham Elementary School Parent and Citizens Committee threatened to boycott the school in protest of what they saw as the inferior education offered their children. They were upset about the fact that the achievement test scores of Higgenbotham students were eighteen months to two years behind those of students at a nearby largely white school and that those differences were perpetuated by the system of curriculum differentiation that existed in the high schools. They were also troubled by the claim that such problems were the result of black cultural deprivation. The real reason for such achievement gaps, they argued, was that Detroit offered a 'dual system' of education that undermined black achievement.[27]

Three months earlier, the Ad Hoc Committee of Citizens Concerned with Equal Educational Opportunity questioned the apparent assumption of many Detroit educators that the low achievement of black youth was the

result of cultural deprivation. Addressing the poor reading performance of black students on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the committee, which was organized the previous year by a group of prominent black community leaders, refused to accept the position voiced by many school administrators who saw this problem as the result of the deficient home and community experiences of these students. Such an explanation, they claimed, was an 'excuse for denying the potential of the Negro child in our educational system, and to frustrate his efforts to improve his circumstances'.[28]

As one member of the committee, Charles Wells, pointed out after listening to countless school administrators voice this viewpoint, '... it became more and more evident that they were convinced that Negro children could not learn beyond a minimal level and that reading programs would reflect this expectation'.[29] A year later, the committee challenged the efficacy of the notion of compensatory education that Detroit educators had routinely invoked to justify their reliance on a differentiated, remedial curriculum as the solution to the problems of black school achievement. They argued that these so-called compensatory programs did nothing to improve the performance of African American students. On the contrary, they claimed that the offering of such programs had driven whites out of schools as well as lowered even further the academic achievement of black students.[30]

This division of opinion among the city's African American population was, however, not to last. Over the course of the next three years, the involvement in this debate of those espousing a black nationalist position had the effect of mitigating these internal differences. One of the oldest of an array of contending political ideologies that African Americans have advanced to describe their vision of freedom and equality, black nationalism traces its roots in Detroit first to the 1920s and the establishment of a chapter of Marcus Garvey's United Negro Improvement Association and a decade later to the emergence of a fledging Black Muslim movement under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad.[31] While they were not uniformly separatists in their outlook, black nationalists did not hold racial integration to be a high goal. They doubted that whites could be trusted to promote the cause of black equality and consequently eschewed alliances with them. They were much more interested in securing control of the institutions that served blacks.[32]

We can get a sense of what distinguished the city's black nationalist educational agenda by looking at the articles that Karl Gregory, the principal of the Freedom School, wrote in the *Michigan Chronicle* in June and August of 1966. A good number of his articles echoed complaints that blacks had made for years regarding the lack of funds that the city's

schools had been receiving from the state and the fact that segregated schools were providing African American students with an inadequate education. He went on to say, however, that in a democracy parents and students 'must have a share in running their school'. As Gregory saw it, the problems facing the Detroit schools were not simply to be remedied by more money and new laws. Rather, the real problem was that blacks were shut out from any influence on the workings of their schools.[33]

This message was also echoed by Rev. Albert Cleage, a leading black civil rights leader and community activist. At a Democratic Party meeting a month before Gregory penned his article, Cleage noted that black children could not be educated in Detroit's schools as long as those schools were under white control. For Cleage, the numerous problems facing Detroit's schools, overcrowding, the presence of unqualified teachers and administrators, low achievement, and racism, were the result of the fact that the city's schools were not accountable to its black citizens. And this was a situation that could only be overcome if African Americans controlled the schools. Black America, he argued, was in the midst of a 'Cultural Revolution' that offered African Americans a new sense of identity. They were increasingly becoming aware of their blackness and their separateness from white society. Blacks looked to the schools to provide their children with the knowledge of African history and the realization that black science, religion, and philosophy had reached maturity when 'the white man was a naked savage living in caves and eating raw meat'. In this vein, Cleage believed that black teachers had a special responsibility. If African American children, he noted '... go to school with a sense of black consciousness and black pride, hungrily seeking after understanding of self, and you tell them about George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and the plantation days, you are betraying the trust that black people have in you'. Detroit's schools, Cleage maintained, had to be staffed by black teachers and administrators. Beyond that, however, the schools had to serve Detroit's black community, which required black control.[34]

This was virtually the same message that was conveyed by the Declaration of Black Teachers, which was adopted in April of 1968, at Detroit's Black Ministers-Teachers Conference. The city's schools, according to this statement, were not at present designed to benefit black youth. For that to happen teachers would have to follow certain 'commandments', including:

> We shall not kill the minds and bodies of our children with underestimation of their worth and the worth of Black people.
> We shall not adulterate our instruction but shall enrich it with the aim of developing Black youth who will be of service to the Black Community.

> We shall not steal their time and energies in busy work in activities designed to promote middle class, white values, and goals.
> We shall not bear witness against our children nor against our fellow Black teachers but shall do our best to lift them from the hell of ignorance, confusion and despair in which a racist society has placed them.[35]

Detroit's black nationalists had a distinct educational vision. In their June 1967 recommendations for quality education, the Inner City Parents Council argued that the low academic achievement of black youth resulted from the city's schools 'deliberate and systematic destruction of the Afro-American child's self-image and racial pride'.[36] They went on to claim that in rejecting integration in favor of separation, black Detroiters were in effect reasserting 'pride in their own history, culture, and power'.[37] The curriculum was one of the means for securing that separation. Black children, they noted, required a 'different educational orientation' than that provided to white children. The course of study had to offer black students 'a knowledge of their history, their culture, and their destiny'. The textbooks had to emphasize the worth and value of black people. Courses should be problem-centered and afford black children the opportunity to discuss the issues that faced their community. And finally, black children needed a school program that would nurture their artistic and creative abilities.[38] The report concluded with the proviso that all of this must be undertaken without undermining students' academic studies. Although the Parents Council proposed a different curriculum for black children, it was not a program like Detroit's existing differentiated course of study that would channel different groups of children to different and unequal school programs and ultimate life destinies.

The Mayoral Takeover of 2000

Black nationalism was never to realize the educational vision it set for itself at the end of the decade of the 1960s. Detroit did not embrace community control but embarked instead on a failed, ten year experiment with decentralization that involved dividing the city into eight regions, each with its own regional superintendent and elected regional board. The result was the creation throughout the city of segregated black and white educational enclaves, an increase in black-white battles over schooling, and continuing deterioration in the educational achievement of black youth. In a 1981 referendum, Detroiters voted to bring back a centralized school system.[39]

Low academic achievement among African American youth continued to plague Detroit into the decade of the 1990s. A 1997 report noted that less than twenty per cent of the city's high school students scored at the

proficient level on the state's competency test.[40] Writing in the *Detroit News* in February of 1999, Dan DeGrow, the Republican majority leader of the Michigan Senate, commented that the city's high school graduation rate was 30 per cent and that only 10 per cent of Detroit's 245 elementary schools were fully accredited by the state.[41]

In his State of the Union message in January of 1999, Michigan's Republican Governor, John Engler, renewed a call that he had made two years earlier for a state takeover of failing school districts. The impetus for this call was in part the success that he attributed to a similar effort by the Illinois Legislature to give Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley the power to appoint the city's school board and chief executive officer (CEO).[42] Engler's principal target for this proposal was Detroit, and the result was a year and a half legislative battle that culminated in the replacement of Detroit's elected board of education by a seven member reform board of which six members were appointed by the mayor with the seventh seat given to the state school superintendent or his designee. The principal task of the new board was to appoint a CEO who would have expanded powers to operate the school system with little control by the board. The plan was to be in effect for five years at the end of which time Detroit voters could petition for a referendum on the continuation of the mayoral appointed board.

The takeover precipitated a conflict that pitted segments of the city's majority black population against each other, that brought Detroit's largely black Democratic legislative delegation into conflict with both the city's African American, Democratic mayor, Dennis Archer, and the Republican dominated state legislature, and that created a working alliance around school reform between Mayor Archer and Governor Engler. In May of 1999, the new board selected the former president of Wayne State University, David Adamany, as interim CEO and a year later appointed Kenneth Burnely, then superintendent of the Colorado Springs Public Schools, as its choice for Detroit's first permanent CEO.[43]

In the context of the history that I have relayed thus far in this essay, what is important about this struggle for mayoral control is the degree to which it changed the terms in which urban educational conflict has come to play itself out in Detroit. In 1973, Detroit elected its first black mayor. Four years later, there was a black majority on both the city council and the board of education. And by 1980, the majority of the city's population was black.[44] The campaign for mayoral control was no longer the black-white struggle of the past between an African American citizenry challenging the authority of a white educational establishment. Rather, on one side stood a black and white coalition in support of restructuring the schools including Governor Engler, Mayor Archer, a few key black

community leaders, the Republican majority in the state legislature, a handful of Democratic legislators, the city's two major newspapers and a number of their columnists, Detroit's principal black newspaper, and, according to one poll, about 40 per cent of the city's black population. And arrayed against them was a largely but not exclusively African American alliance comprising the vast majority of Detroit's Democratic legislative delegation, the Detroit City Council, several black community leaders, a number of politicians and school administrators and board of education members outside of Detroit, and, according to the poll cited above, about half of the city's black population.[45]

Black Detroiters, then, were to be found on both sides of the controversy. The city's two major black organizations, the NAACP and the Urban League, took opposing positions on the takeover. The NAACP opposed the takeover on the grounds that removing an elected board of education in favor of an appointed one threatened the voting rights of Detroiters. The League, however, supported the takeover. The key issue, as they saw it, was not voting rights but the need to have quality schools that would prepare the city's children for jobs and other opportunities.[46] Supporters of the takeover in fact included black organizations such as the Detroit Association of Black Organizations, 100 Black Men, and the Ecumenical Ministers Alliance as well as such integrated groups as the Detroit Federation of Teachers, the Detroit Organization of School Administrators and Supervisors, New Detroit, and the Detroit Regional Chamber of Commerce.[47]

What divided the proponents of the takeover from those who opposed it was the confidence that they were willing to place in the city's schools. Those who supported the takeover did not believe that the district had made much progress in solving the problems of low academic achievement and doubted its ability to do so in the future. The opponents claimed that the schools were in fact making progress in that direction. The kind of racial antagonism that had once punctuated Detroit's educational battles, struggles that were often divided by very different understandings of what constituted equal opportunity and equality, had become battles over different estimates of which forms of school organization could ensure the social mobility of black children. A black minister and supporter of the takeover reflected the frustration of many proponents over the emphasis that had been given to issues of race in this dispute. He challenged the claim of those who attributed racist motives to Engler and the whites who supported him. As he put it, 'the only race that matters is the race that succeeds in properly educating our children before another generation is lost'.[48] In other words, the debates in Detroit over education were coming to look more like those that often broke out among white middle

class suburbanites over the kind of educational provision that offered their children the best route to economic and social success.

Race did not exactly disappear from this debate. There were those who saw the takeover as a racist assault. An African American member of Detroit's Democratic legislative delegation question why the city was singled out for a take over. 'The only school district targeted', according to this legislator, was 'the biggest and blackest'.[49] Similarly, another opponent of the takeover, a carpenter with a stepdaughter in the city's schools, noted that 'the Republicans are primarily a gang of white men trying to do whatever they can'.[50] Yet, it was more frequently the case that opponents of the takeover couched their opposition in terms of the threat that this initiative posed to the voting rights of Detroiters. As one of the city's black ministers saw it, 'everybody that's voting on this thing to take away my right to vote are [legislators from] another area, and I don't have the right to vote them out of office'.[51]

Since the takeover, CEO Burnley has reported modest gains in student performance on state competency tests.[52] Yet, there have been calls for his removal, particularly because of his decision to reduce expenditures by closing schools and laying off teachers.[53] And there have been calls for a return to the old elective school board. In September of 2003, Michigan's Democratic Governor, Jennifer Granholm, proposed a plan in which the promised fifth year referendum on the continuation of the mayoral appointed school board would be scrapped in favor of an elected board whose powers would be limited to appointing and removing the chief executive officer with the mayor having authority to approve or veto that appointment. Two months later, Kwame Kilpatrick, Detroit's current mayor, introduced another alternative plan that called on Detroit voters to decide in March of 2004 on whether to return to the old elected board of education or to establish a new system in which there would be a nine member board elected by districts with a CEO appointed by the mayor. Under this proposal, the new board would monitor student performance, review annual financial audits and the annual budget, and provide the mayor with an annual evaluation of the CEO. The CEO, who would be appointed by the mayor, would retain his current authority to manage the day-to-day operations of the schools.[54] Kilpatrick's proposal did not receive the necessary legislative approval. A substitute proposal that Kilpatrick accepted, allowed voters to decide in the November 2004 referendum between a return to the old elected school board or a plan in which a nine member school board elected by districts would have the power to approve or reject the mayor's appointment for CEO.[55]

Kilpatrick, who was at the time of the takeover effort minority leader of the Michigan House of Representatives and a member of Detroit's

Democratic legislative delegation, had opposed mayoral control. His opposition stemmed not only from his fears about the threat that removing the elected board posed to the voting rights of Detroiters but also from his longstanding political battles with then Mayor Archer. In his role as mayor, however, Kilpatrick has, it seems, come to recognize that there are important benefits to be gained in providing Detroit with the kind of powerful educational leader that the city's CEO had become. At this point, he seems to be caught pursuing contradictory goals. On the one hand, he wishes to preserve this reform. On the other hand, however, he also wants to assert the voting rights of black Detroiters to select their board of education, a right that citizens of every other Michigan school district possess. The plan that he is advocating to replace the reform board is, then, something of a compromise in which the issue of academic achievement trumps that of race without losing the symbolic value that black empowerment in the form of an elected school board holds for a city like Detroit.

Conclusions

Taken together, the three case studies that comprise this essay point to how important issues of achievement and race have been in the history of urban school reform, certainly in Detroit and possibly elsewhere. Curriculum differentiation appeared on the scene in the early years of the twentieth century as a response of urban school leaders to what they believed to be the increasing presence in big city classrooms of low-achieving students, particularly the children of recently arrived immigrants. Curriculum differentiation, rooted as it was in inegalitarian assumptions about students and their ability to succeed in school, became the principal instrument whereby twentieth century urban school administrators have been able to sort students ostensibly by ability, but just as likely by race and class, and channel them to different and unequal educational programs and social destinies.

As a consequence it is not surprising that by the middle of the twentieth century the growing black populations of large American cities came into conflict with the white educators who were responsible for implementing the practice of curriculum differentiation. It was out of such black-white struggles as Detroit's Northern High School walkout that African Americans began to shape their own vision for the education of their children, one that departed from the viewpoint of white urban school leaders. Although that vision was sometimes framed in inflammatory rhetoric and called for the radical reorganization of urban schools, it represented an effort on the part of urban blacks to enhance the academic achievement of their children.

And finally, the mayoral takeover of the Detroit Board of Education points to how the demographic and economic transformation of American cities has changed the way in which issues of achievement and race have played themselves out in conflicts surrounding contemporary urban schools. It is argued here that race has not disappeared from these struggles. As Detroit's current mayor, Kwame Kilpatrick, has recognized, race and empowerment are issues that must be taken seriously in the struggle for urban school reform. But what has divided and continues to divide Detroiters in this black led city is not so much race but their faith in the ability of their schools to effectively educate their children. If the experience of Detroit tells us anything, it suggests that race remains a concern, albeit something of a diminished one, among urban African Americans. More important, it seems, is the abiding concern that they share with their fellow citizens throughout the nation in lifting academic achievement higher in a world in which school success is vital for individual and social advancement.

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NOTES

1. This essay is a revised and expanded version of the CUME Annual Lecture on Urban Education, Community Engagement, and School Reform that I delivered at Indiana University-Purdue University/Indianapolis in March of 2004.
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