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Between Two Litanies: Equity and Public Education in Richmond, VA

DENNIS WILLIAMS II



After asking a school-district leader in Richmond Public Schools if there was a way to address the habit of white families sending their children to county and private schools, I was told the best way to change the pattern was to make public schools “better.” It was also suggested that I reframe the question to include affluent families of color since they do the same thing. That kind of accuracy is important. But most families that historically had this habit have been white families.¹ [Most children in Richmond who go on to attend private and county schools today are white children. Most people who have not really supported equity in education have been white people.](#) Many segregated private schools and county schools function as an apparatus in the continued resistance to desegregation and are, therefore, [support race, class, and ability based apartheid.](#)² I don’t mean to get lost in the weeds just yet, so let’s return to the anecdote:

There I was, peering into a Google Meet made mostly of first-name initials, getting ready to preach in a [Denzel Washington-Roman J. Israel-type voice](#), not at all worried about losing my job or paying my oppressive student loans. “Better?” I interrupted. “Better is what we’ve been fighting for since it was illegal for us to read, since we could not (and still cannot) legally congregate in public spaces without the specter of state surveillance or violence.

“Better is school improvement and equalization campaigns, equal-pay lawsuits, federally authorized desegregation, and other such policies for which we have already argued and which have already been mandated by district, circuit, and supreme courts in such cases as *Bradley v. School Board of the City of Richmond*.”³ I paused here for dramatic effect before citing thirty-six other court cases from memory and cueing up snippets of [the New York Times podcast, “Nice White Parents.”](#) Then I hollered, “Everybody, turn on your [expletive] cameras!”

Beginning again with pretentious composure, I said, “Better is not a school system made to appease affluent families.” Another well-placed, dramatic pause here. “The kind of better we need is the kind of better so antithetical to the logic of white supremacy that that logic must reflexively oppose it.”

Though the exchange you just read was fabricated mostly, I did pose that question to a school-district leader in Richmond. Admittedly, I do not completely disagree with the answer it garnered (though I still take issue with its reframing); our public schools in Richmond need improvement, and many policies that exist, have existed, or could exist, would lead to a better, more equitable system of education. Some of those policies are listed below:

Converting private schools into desegregated magnet schools, providing universal income to families that are in need, decolonizing state-mandated curricula and standardized tests, abolishing the carceral system targeting BIPOC youth, increasing teacher pay, increasing the number of non-white teachers and administrators, untethering funding from property values and sales taxes, increasing teacher-retention rates, ending the overidentification of BIPOC students as children with disabilities, mitigating bias and unjust

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treatment by introducing mindfulness to everyone in schools, desegregating schools, maintaining a diverse array of elective classes and other non-tested subjects, and providing free/high-quality education to everyone.

There is such a vast archive of similar examples from which I could pull that the purpose of this essay is simply to make the following points clear: Reforms, proposals, and policies such as those itemized above have been churned out year after year, decade after decade with a bit of traction at best and, at worst, a predictable and debilitating backlash.⁴ This backlash can be viewed as a social mechanism as persistent as the struggle for racial equality itself. It sits stubbornly between an ever-growing litany of possible social changes and the oppressive social systems which it aims to protect. And, finally, this backlash functions in such a way that if we continue to generate educational policies while never fully addressing its magnitude and damage, we will never achieve educational equity even as we seek to make our schools “better.”

I take this position because, for fourteen years, I’ve experienced the City of Richmond as a Black man of various, non-normative identities. I have studied the Civil Rights Movement under historian, Brian J. Daugherty, a mentor of mine who specializes in school desegregation in Virginia, and have also organized within various activist groups. I have taught university students about cultures of oppression and freedom. Most importantly, I have taught in Richmond Public Schools, at various Richmond-based non-profits, and at the Richmond City Jail. This list of experiences has made me acutely aware of how oppressed/non-white groups have mobilized in pursuits of equity, and how many of those groups view equity in education as vital.

Educational equity would look like educational reform implemented in the absence of the reflexive mechanism of white backlash which, again, has historically been racist but can be classist and ableist as well.

My experience also tells me that, when oppressed or non-white groups come very close to meaningful social change, white-identified folk often prevent it. Almost reflexively and not always in their own interest, a critical level of people who call themselves white make known in sometimes seemingly innocuous and sometimes incredibly violent ways that, “we can’t have *that*, so we must *do this*.” The phrase “do this” can be replaced with the term “backlash,” which can take the form of anything between race massacres, massive resistance, white flight, benign neglect, voter suppression, terrorist insurrection (as seen on January 6, 2021), or [threatening to send children to private schools](#). This is all to say, educational equity would look like educational reform implemented in the absence of the reflexive mechanism of white backlash which, again, has historically been racist but can be classist and ableist as well.

This brings us to an actual proposal: folk who identify as white can figure out how to stop those who also identify as white from backlashing while the work toward equity in education and elsewhere is done. As simple as this proposal is, it begs a series of questions:

- a) *Why would white folk stop protecting their privileged social position to support sweeping improvements in a school system to which they do not currently send their children and to which they have not sent them since the days of Harry Byrd?*
- b) *What will white folk do to turn white folk’s minds away from an ethos of supremacist and elitist logic to one that is deeply humanizing and compassionate?*

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I'm not sure how white people in Richmond will answer these questions or what productive solutions they will derive when they do. But, at this point, I see such answers and such solutions as the only innovative tools in our kit. Since this may be dissatisfying and nebulous for some, or unrealistic for others, I think it is best to make two additional points clear:

- a) *It is not my responsibility as a Black person to figure out how white folk will stop the hatred and prejudice of other white folk from getting in the way of equity, broadly conceived, or in the way of equitable education, more specifically.*
- b) *It is, however, my responsibility to tell the people who ought to have figured that out a long time ago to figure it out now.*

I must take this stance because throughout our nation's history, non-white people have been at the frontline in the struggle for racial equity. We still are, and, barring some major event, we will continue in this position. We are born into new generations, which are forced to do and say mostly the same things, augmenting what could become an infinite litany just to see a backlashing people get in its way. At such a juncture, to achieve equity in public schools, those with considerable privilege can begin to figure out how they will delete from their consciousness, from the consciousness of their loved ones, and from their institutions what bell hooks calls an ethic of domination,⁵ which usually revolves around Whiteness, around other cultures of supremacy, and around this last litany which follows without order:

anti-Black racism, anti-Semitic racism, anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Asian racism, anti-Latinx racism, colorism, ableism, ageism, sexism, sanism, classism, elitism, capitalism, anti-environmentalism, heteronormativism, imperialism, individualism, eurocentrism, materialism, patriarchy and whatever other interlocked system of oppression exists or will exist which, to quote the late poet Mark Aguhar, "I didn't describe, I couldn't describe, will learn to describe" but that we all should know are deeply wrong.

Dennis Williams II

Dennis Williams II, MA, MEd, is a teacher in Richmond Public Schools and an adjunct professor in the Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Department at Virginia Commonwealth University. In 2019, he was awarded *New Teacher of the Year* at Albert Hill Middle School in the City of Richmond. Most recently, he has been on-boarded as a facilitator at Richmond's Innerwork Center, formerly Chrysalis. As a high-school educator, his pedagogy centers on rigorous compassion and on embedding mindfulness practices into the curriculum. At the college level, he assists students in developing critical, cultural awareness through the analysis of visual culture. A writing hobbyist, he has poems forthcoming in Johns Hopkins University's *African American Review* and Illinois State University's *Obsidian Literature and Art in the African Diaspora*. Dennis was raised in Decatur, GA, and attended Atlanta's Dekalb School of the Arts before moving to Richmond for art school.

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Endnotes

- 1 For examples of groups which opposed desegregation and for a summary of government assistance such as tuition grants and tax exemptions that benefited White private schools in Virginia, see Brian J. Daugherty's *Keep on Keeping on: The NAACP and the Implementation of Brown v. Board of Education in Virginia*, particularly chapters 5 and 6.
- 2 For an explanation of the social function of private schools in the South, see Charles T. Clotfelter's article "Private Schools, Segregation, and the Southern States."
- 3 See Brian J. Daugherty's chapter "The Green Light: The NAACP and School Integration in Virginia, 1968-1974" in *Keep on Keeping on*.
- 4 See Matthew F. Delmont's *Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation*; See also Erwin Chemerinsky's chapter "The Segregation and Resegregation of American Public Education: The Courts' Role" in *School Resegregation: Must the South Turn Back?* and Michael J. Klarman's article "How Brown Changed Race Relations: The Backlash Thesis."
- 5 See bell hooks' chapter, "Love as Practice of Freedom" in *Outlaw Culture*.