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Desegregating Chicago’s Public Schools


Dionne Danns
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In the annals of school desegregation in American history, surprisingly little attention has been given to Chicago, long recognized as one of the country’s most segregated cities. This is partly because its public schools were never subject to the wrenching legal battles and court-ordered integration plans that many other urban districts experienced. Studies about why desegregation cases didn't happen, after all, hardly seem as compelling as those that describe the many dramatic encounters that characterized cities where legal decisions had an immediate impact on the daily lives of students, parents, and educators. In this illuminating book, however, Dionne Danns demonstrates how legal inaction can be just as revealing of the social and political forces that historically constrained equity in urban schools.

In certain respects, it is rather surprising that a major desegregation court decision was never rendered in Chicago; it was the only major city in the Great Lakes region to avoid one. As Danns clearly documents, this was largely a function of the city’s importance in state and national politics, and the power wielded by its legendary mayor of the postwar era, Richard J. Daley. There certainly was no shortage of local controversy over school segregation and related questions of equity in education during this period. Activists in Chicago were national leaders in identifying the manifold ways in which racial inequality could persist in a school system that claimed to be evenhanded and “colorblind.” Yet the Daley regime successfully resisted efforts by protestors and by both state and federal authorities to compel the school system to seriously expand upon limited voluntary desegregation measures.

As Danns’s research shows, this situation would last well beyond the period of Daley’s immediate influence. By the time of his death in 1976, the politics of desegregation had shifted dramatically, both at the national and local levels. This meant that efforts to achieve meaningful desegregation were continually stymied by a constellation of factors and circumstances, despite ample documentation of inequity and discrimination in the provision of school resources and
ongoing avoidance of racial integration. As Danns notes in her conclusion, a “shifting federal agenda, local political power, stakeholder opposition and demographic transitions” combined to make school desegregation a highly elusive goal in the Windy City. Based on solid research and delivered in straightforward prose, her instructive study breaks new ground in Chicago history and historical examinations of northern school integration. We are pleased to include it in the series, and expect that other readers will find it as enlightening as we have.

William J. Reese
and
John L. Rury
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