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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)

**Schools learn integration obtained through coercion is short-lived****BRUCE THOMPSON**

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Can integration be saved from the integrationists? When I was elected to the Milwaukee School Board three years ago, I naively assumed that integration meant having a mix of black children and white children and children of other backgrounds all learning together in a school.

Yet I found that proposals that would lead to more integration were savagely attacked by groups that claimed to be keepers of the integrationist flame. The same groups were adamant defenders of policies driving white and middle-class families out of the city, leading to growing racial separation.

An explanation of sorts appeared in The New York Times' "Week in Review" section (April 2), where Jeffrey Rosen, writing on "The Lost Promise of Integration," made it abundantly clear that integration is not true integration unless it is coercive.

He peppers his article with quotes such as, "You can't reconcile choice with diversity," and "No non-coercive mechanism for racial integration . . . has evolved." In other words, school integration is not true integration unless at least some of the children or their families don't want them to be there.

As many cities found 20 or so years ago, coercive integration, with its accompanying busing and racially based decision-making, can vastly increase the number of schools with a diverse population in a very short time. Milwaukee, for example, quickly went from few racially diverse schools to almost all of its schools being racially diverse.

But as these same cities discovered, integration obtained through coercion is short-lived. The number of schools counted as non-integrated in Milwaukee rose from 11 to 99 in 12 years. One big factor was a drop in the proportion of white students, from around 70% of total enrollment before the integration plan started to 16% today.

To be successful, coercive integration depends on a level of population control incompatible with liberal democracy. Lacking such controls, middle-class parents can escape the coercion by moving to the next town or county. Eventually, segregation between neighborhoods within a city is replaced by segregation between a city and its suburbs.

Besides being ineffective as a means of long-range integration, coercive integration has several other bad effects on a school system:

-- It corrupts the school culture by basing decisions primarily on the child's race, rather than on what is in the child's best interests.

-- It pits parents against the schools and their boards, who tell them that meeting the racial numbers is more important than their child's education.

-- It encourages a blame-the-customer attitude. Racism, rather than school quality, becomes an easy explanation for why parents leave the schools.

-- It ignores whether true integration takes place within the school, so long as the overall numbers meet the goal. Often, there are very different achievement levels between races in a nominally integrated school.

Do recent court opinions against race-based decision-making presage the death of integration? Consider the following examples, taken from the Milwaukee experience:

-- Three years ago, the Milwaukee School Board changed its policy to allow high schools to institute admissions processes. At Rufus King High School, prior to the change, a black student had a one in six chance of being accepted. In the year following the change, all black students meeting the requirements were accepted, and there