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Comfortable Inaction, In Action

Mike Suarez

University of Colorado, Boulder, michael.suarez@colorado.edu

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Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
history of education

Notes

¹ For examples, see the **Of Note** source list at the end of this essay.

² See Kim Phillips-Fein, "Conservatism: The State of the Field," *Journal of American History* (98,3, 2011, 723-743); Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 2005); Daniel Rodgers, *Age of Fracture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Alan Brinkley, "The Problem of American Conservatism," *The American Historical Review* (1994): 409-429.

Comfortable Inaction, In Action*

Mike Suarez

Dionne Danns. *Desegregating Chicago's Public Schools: Policy Implementation, Politics, and Protest, 1965-1985*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 260 pp. \$100.00

There has been a proliferation of historical scholarship over the past twenty years addressing school desegregation and state enacted policies outside of the South.¹ Danns' book explicates how educational inequality in Chicago withstood a political climate that sought to confront social inequities through legislation, such as the 1964 Civil Rights Act, to the 1980s, a moment when national politics were dominated by the New Right's libertarian ideals of individualism and limited federal government.² Historians have previously explored how Chicago became, what Dr. Martin Luther King called, "the most segregated city in the country." Danns' book offers a vital and important contribution to this historiography, as it sets out to specifically answer how and why segregation continued to exist in spite of federal policies and court orders requiring school desegregation in Chicago.

Concise and well researched, *Desegregating Chicago's Public Schools* illustrates how state and federal policies failed to respond to the city's racial divide. Danns contends

*The title paraphrases words spoken by President Kennedy in 1961 at the 14th annual convention of Americans for Democratic Action.

Mike Suarez is a former high school teacher and current doctoral candidate in the School of Education at the University of Colorado at Boulder. His program emphasis is in Education Foundations, Policy and Practice. He can be reached at michael.suarez@colorado.edu.

that “the politics and disconnection between policy formulation and policy implementation” guised “the dynamics of a democratic society in which a white majority sought to protect its privileges even when it involved the continued marginalization of minorities.”³ The scope of Danna’s book reaches beyond simply presenting a political history of Chicago or its public school system, as the book also provides an excellent model on how to analyze and interpret the failure to enforce state and federally enacted policies. In doing so, Danna’s book offers readers a comprehensive historical analysis of school desegregation in Chicago, as well as an exemplar on how to critique not only institutional change, but also institutional torpor.

The central claim in *Desegregating Chicago’s Public Schools* suggests that, “political, economic, and social forces combined to make it difficult to fully desegregate the schools despite repeated efforts throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.”⁴ Danna frames her argument around three contentious, yet understudied areas of analysis: faculty desegregation, state involvement with student desegregation, and the federal government’s role in school desegregation.⁵ The narrative begins with an early case study of the Redmond Plan. In the middle of the 1967-68 school year Superintendent Redmond proposed a scaled-down desegregation plan that would bus Black students from specific neighborhoods to nearby predominately White schools. Regardless of race, public response to the idea was palpable. Employing an analytical lens grounded in critical race theory, Danna illustrates how the Redmond Plan was not truly a mode of integration, but rather a policy that put the onus on Black families and students. For instance, speaking at a PTA meeting on behalf of the Bryn Mawr community Mrs. Chatman Wailes stated, “Stabilization should not be placed as a burden on the backs of Negroes. It should be a total community, understanding the solution does not mean a containment of minority groups. South Shore bigotry wants to sacrifice this generation of Negro pupils to keep white families here. If there are whites who want to leave let them go.”⁶ Ultimately, the district rolled out a very small-scaled, piloted version of the

³ Dionne Danna, *Desegregating Chicago’s Public Schools: Policy Implementation, Politics, and Protest, 1965-1985* (Palgrave Macmillan), 9.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

Redmond Plan. Still, and as would be the case with future initiatives, the application of the Redmond Plan was much more a “face-saving compromise with HEW’s Office of Education” to address a previous complaint filed under Title VI of the 1965 Civil Rights Act.⁷

⁷ Ibid., 16.

The Redmond Plan sets the stage for Dannels’ first of three focal areas of inquiry, the desegregation of school faculty. Similar to issues raised about the Redmond Plan, faculty desegregation was a burden imposed upon the Black community and had debilitating effects on Black students and faculty.⁸ Jesse Jackson, the figurehead of Operation PUSH, one of Chicago’s larger community action organizations maintained, “the desegregation plan would only take experienced black teachers out of black schools and replace them with white teachers incapable of inspiring black students.”⁹ The Chicago School Board never sought full integration by dispersing its staff according to race and expertise. Instead, the district uprooted exemplary Black teachers and made it difficult for young Black educators to obtain initial employment. Access into the profession had already been difficult for new Black educators, as “many black teachers spent years on substitute lists until a position opened at a black school. Blacks also tended to be on substitute lists longer than whites, as they were identified and intentionally sent to black schools.”¹⁰ Those who did obtain teaching credentials were often limited to openings at predominantly Black schools. Meanwhile, the students in Black schools paid the ultimate price for the district’s approach to faculty desegregation. These schools lost strong, experienced Black teachers to predominantly White schools, and in turn received inexperienced or less effective White teachers.

⁸ Other historians have explored the impacts of desegregating faculty in the American South, but Dannels’ findings sheds new light on the issue from an example in the North. See Michael Fultz, “The Displacement of Black Educators Post-Brown: An Overview and Analysis,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44.1 (2004): 11-45; David S. Cecelski, *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Vanessa Siddle Walker, *Their Highest Potential: An African American School Community in the Segregated South: An African American School Community in the Segregated South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

⁹ Dannels, 74.

¹⁰ Ibid., 61.

Personal testimonies carry the narrative in this chapter framed strongly around sources including school board meetings, community organization protests, and newspaper editorials, along with a collection of personally conducted interviews. Well-substantiated, the chapter presents a new, northern perspective to Michael Fultz’ findings on school desegregation in the South: “Moreover, as African-American

educators were acutely aware, desegregation was legally and politically structured in a manner which allowed deeply rooted White racial ideologies and practices virtual free reign in determining critical educational policy outcomes for most of the first two decades post-Brown.”¹¹ Although this chapter succeeds at illustrating how Chicago Public Schools responded to a federal mandate, its tone stands somewhat alone from the rest of the book through its use of vignettes and individual accounts. Danns shifts the narrative in subsequent chapters toward the political backdrop of nearly twenty years of failed policy implementation. The chapters on state and federal involvement in student desegregation do offer some robust descriptions of individual and community perspectives, such as the 1963 and 1964 Freedom Day Boycotts. And, the analysis in these chapters piece together how and why the state and federal government failed to implement enacted policies.

Danns’ second field of inquiry explores the state’s languid attempt at enforcing school desegregation. In exceptionally detailed prose, this chapter exposes how a series of political maneuvers allowed school officials, alongside the city’s turgid Mayor Richard J. Daley, to side step the state’s demand for compliance with federally mandated orders for student desegregation. Danns states, “Without a clear indication that the state would hold Chicago Public Schools financially accountable, school officials continued to evade the state’s demands.”¹² Local leader’s thwarted most attempts by the state to hold Chicago Public Schools accountable for school desegregation measures. To demonstrate this point, Danns highlights Superintendent Hannon’s proposal “Access to Excellence.” Limited in scope and failing to address the same concerns raised in response to the Redmond Plan, Access to Excellence required schools to serve no more than “90 percent white or minority students at an individual school.”¹³ Addressing the issue of inequality of educational opportunity, Access to Excellence promoted the implementation of more rigorous courses for all schools, such as Advanced Placement classes. Access to Excellence came under attack from both the state, for not meeting

¹¹ Fultz, 39.

¹² Danns, 92.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 110.

their minimal requirements, and from groups such as the Urban League, who noted the program's implicit "elitism" through its support for those individuals and communities already receiving the most resources. Regardless of the growing amount of criticism from the state, community organizations, and a number of notable researchers such as Gary Orfield, the district was never seriously held accountable for implementing procedures that would comply with federal and state statutes. As the Urban League called it, things remained "business as usual."¹⁴ Danns explains, "Because the state failed in its efforts, the federal government became involved in requiring student desegregation in Chicago. After years of pressure, the state lost its ability to force Chicago to meet its guidelines."¹⁵ The failure of the state to impose true pressure on Chicago Public Schools to desegregate its students led to federal involvement.

Danns' last area of analysis, the federal government's role in school desegregation, illuminates how shifting federal policies from the mid-1960s through the early-1980s allowed for unabated inaction by the city's public school district. Throughout the Johnson, Nixon and Ford administrations school officials in Chicago skirted the implementation of a systemic policy to desegregate its schools by proposing plans that minimally addressed the issue simply to obtain ESEA funds. Not until the death of Mayor Daley and his democratic political machine, alongside President Carter's demand for compliance under Title VI of the ESEA, did Chicago Public Schools face a fervent attempt at forcing the city into action. However, when an updated version of the Access to Excellence plan was proposed to meet Title VI statutes, the district contended with an even more formidable opponent, a collective rejection of the plan from the city's Black and White citizens. Danns shows how two communities with drastically different ideals and goals aligned in a collective unwillingness to accept Access to Excellence II. Delicately balancing the issue at both a micro and macro level, Danns excels at pointing out how hastily proposed policies neglected to consider the perspectives of the communities they would directly impact.

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁵ Ibid., 118.

In the end, the federal government did not successfully enforce compliance, nor did the district’s leadership even propose plans that would meet those requirements. So often was the case across the country, desegregation of Chicago’s public schools necessitated involvement by the justice department. Having not met the requirements of Title VI, the justice department forced a “consent decree” upon the school District in 1980. At this point, Danns’ claim that a federal policy in a state of constant fluctuation failed to resolve the issue of student desegregation in Chicago truly hits home. The court ordered consent decree came just as Ronald Reagan took office, which quickly ushered in changes to federal involvement with school desegregation. In the process, the federal government relegated the consent decree to the status of policy enactment without the necessary authority to ensure its enforcement. As many other historians have noted, Reagan’s presidency represented a shift in both American political ideals and its social agenda. More and more White citizens of Chicago and residents of its vastly growing suburbs aligned with a burgeoning political ideology that viewed state forced policies as an infringement upon individual liberties (or what Kevin Kruse called the desire for “freedom of association”).¹⁶ To go further, by the time of the Justice Department’s consent decree was established in 1980, “whites barely comprised of half of the city’s population.”¹⁷

¹⁶ Term borrowed from Kevin Kruse’s work in *White Flight*.

¹⁷ Danns, 189.

Desegregating Chicago’s Public Schools is an excellent political history in its own right, but given its implicit argument concerning socially just policies versus our present emphasis on individual liberties and choice, it can also be read as an excellent starting point to understand the origins of policies and practices undergirding our current dilemma of unequal opportunities in public schools. Danns’ book does what it sets out to do, show how “within the school system at least, segregation persists even as rhetoric and beliefs that suggests otherwise prevail”; and it leaves us with an important, thought-provoking question: “Is school desegregation still valued or is it an ideal whose time has come and passed?”¹⁸

¹⁸ Danns, 192.

A Short List of Suggested Readings

About Chicago

Anderson, Alan B., and George W. Pickering. *Confronting the Color Line: The Broken Promise of the Civil Rights Movement in Chicago*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

Danns, Dionne. *Something Better for Our Children: Black Organizing in Chicago Public Schools, 1963-1971*. New York: Psychology Press, 2003.

James R., Ralph Jr. *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993.

Rury, John. L. "Race and the Politics of Chicago's Public Schools: Benjamin Willis and the Tragedy of Urban Education." *Urban Education in the United States: A Historical Reader*. Ed. John L. Rury. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005.

Of Note

Bell, Derrick A. *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Burkholder, Zoe. "From Forced Tolerance to Forced Busing: Wartime Intercultural Education and the Rise of Black Educational Activism in Boston." *Harvard Educational Review* 80, no. 3 (2010): 293-327.

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Orfield, Gary and Susan Eaton. *Dismantling Desegregation: The Quiet Reversal of Brown vs. Board of Education*. New York: New Press, 1996.

Sugrue, Thomas J. *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*. New York: Random House, 2008.

Sugrue, Thomas J. *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.



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