

Resegregation and Tax Reform

Susan Pace Hamill

The uproar about the re-zoning in the Tuscaloosa City Schools sending hundreds of black students to virtually all-black, lower performing schools came as no surprise and further illustrates the tired, but unfortunately true, cliché – those who do not know their history are condemned to repeat it. It also shows that until we stop focusing exclusively on race and accept that tax reform is necessary for all our children to have a chance to get an adequate education, we will never move beyond “the issues we dealt with in the ‘60s.”

Despite spending \$7,225 per student, which is above Alabama’s average of \$6,973, the Tuscaloosa City Schools are inadequately funded. Tuscaloosa still spends substantially less than the national average, which exceeds \$8,000 per child and does not approach the top quarter of states that spend between \$10,000 to \$15,000.

However, schools with fewer poor children perform better despite inadequate funding because middle class and wealthy parents provide donations to their child’s school and make sure their child is not compromised. My two high school children, who have attended the Tuscaloosa City Schools since kindergarten, have done very well. My husband and I have made countless donations to their schools, and, when our children needed something specific (such as a math book the year there were not enough to take home), we simply got out the checkbook.

Since low income parents cannot afford these extras and their children often have additional needs, the funding of schools with greater numbers of poor children must exceed the normal standard for adequacy. The Education Trust, a conservative organization committed to closing the gap between poor and more affluent students, estimates it costs 40 percent more to educate a poor child. This means that if a school system spends \$10,000 per child, equity demands \$14,000 per low income child, requiring schools with proportionally more poor children to receive substantially more funding than other schools in that same system.

Clearly the Tuscaloosa City Schools fail to provide the additional funding needed to raise the performance levels of schools with the greatest concentration of poor children, which are in the western cluster of the city. I fully sympathize with the parents complaining about their children being re-zoned. If I were among them, I would also be very upset.

The funding of schools attended by our poorest children is even worse across most of the state. Over half of our school systems spend less than the state’s average. Only comprehensive tax reform, which must include a complete overhaul of the property tax structure and greater taxes from upper middle class and wealthy Alabamians, can ensure that all our children have access to an adequate education.

What does this have to do with resegregation and race discrimination? Unfortunately, a great deal.

First, since black Alabamians make up a larger share of the poor, given their proportion of the

state's population, black children suffer more from the devastating consequences of inadequate school funding.

Second, and even more disturbing, highly respected historians have proven that before the 1960s reforms fully restored the political rights of black Alabamians, George Wallace and his cronies anchored the Lid Bill in Alabama's constitution in order to starve funding for integrated schools. The Lid Bill keeps property taxes low and guarantees that the largest landowners will never pay more than minuscule property taxes. Arguments that the racially discriminatory effects of the Lid Bill were cleansed in 2003 when voters rejected Governor Riley's tax reform plan have no merit. Since all nine of Alabama's majority black counties voted in favor of the plan, the evidence suggests that black Alabamians proportionally supported the plan more than whites.

Five years ago, when I publicly released my article attacking Alabama's tax inequities and inadequate school funding on Judeo-Christian grounds, I avoided the angle of poverty and race. Like many well-meaning, white, upper-middle class Alabamians, I was too uncomfortable to confront these issues. I believe that this uproar over the re-zoning in the Tuscaloosa City Schools is a sign from God that we must confront the racial element of our inadequate public school funding and respond by supporting tax policy that embraces the divinely created potential of all Alabama's poor children, both black and white.

And if we fail to do this, we will not only offend God. Since black children are still being disproportionately harmed, we will remain stuck with "the issues we dealt with in the '60s."

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