
Thoughts on “The Gary School Crisis of the 1950s: A Personal Memoir”

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I am most grateful to Professor Elizabeth Balanoff for allowing my article to jog her memory concerning school segregation in Gary in the late 1950s. Her comments are most valuable, not only because of her direct participation in the events under discussion but also because of her vast knowledge of the history of the black community in Gary, the topic of her doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago. She has the right combination of experience and training, and she has added a valuable perspective to my understanding of school issues in Gary.

Professor Balanoff's detailed memoir once again demonstrates the value of using oral history to add to the written record. While I did interview a few people who were directly involved in the issues under discussion, I was not sufficiently aware that many others were involved at all levels of school politics. Much of what she remembers never appeared in print because these discussions and negotiations took place in private meetings. More importantly, the usual focus is on the actions of school administrators and board members because their activities most often appear in the newspapers and other public documents. The activities of others, particularly the parents, in this case through the structure of the Froebel PTA, are usually overlooked because they are much less visible. Perhaps Professor Balanoff's most important contribution is not to note that school segregation was still an issue in the 1950s but that the parents, at least at the Froebel School, were heavily in-

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volved, and influential, in school matters. We should be much more aware of the often grassroots nature of school politics.¹

One other point, I certainly agree with Professor Balanoff's conclusion that both race and class have been the basis for school segregation and discrimination. Poor white as well as black children shared inadequate, overcrowded facilities. The problem was not only money—although the resistance of big business to school tax increases was telling—but also the distribution of resources. Despite these problems Professor Balanoff and the other parents had great faith that schooling was important for their children and that they could influence administrative decisions and outcomes. And, to an extent, they did. Her memoir is a valuable addition and correction to my basic understanding of schooling in Gary, Indiana, in this most formative period.

¹ For a recent analysis of such issues earlier in the century see William J. Reese, *Power and the Promise of School Reform: Grass-roots Movements during the Progressive Era* (Boston, 1986).