

## **Race, Politics and Geography in the Development of Public Schools in the Southern U.S.**

*Adam Fairclough (History), Leiden University (Netherlands)*

Unlike most other economically advanced nations, the U.S. has never had a national public school system. Public schools have been locally funded and locally controlled, producing a fragmented non-system consisting of about 1300 politically independent school districts, each of them controlled by locally elected school boards. This extreme decentralization, and the very limited involvement of the federal government, has encouraged large variations between individual school districts. Hence politics, race, and geography, not national or state standards, have determined funding, curriculum, and the overall quality of public schools. The South lagged behind the North, rural areas behind urban ones, and areas of black population behind white areas.

In the South, moreover, the nature of settlement patterns, as well as the region's history of slavery and white supremacy, further retarded public schools by fostering suspicion of public education itself. With few cities and little industry, and most people scattered on farms and plantations, the seasonal demands of agriculture kept boys at home for much of the year and discouraged the desire for anything more than basic literacy. In addition, white elites feared that education would foster independence and ambition among blacks—upon whose labor they depended—and endeavored to stunt black schooling. They did this by starving black schools of funds, refusing to fund high schools for blacks, opposing black higher education, and attempting to exclude “literary” and “academic” subjects from the curriculum. Indeed, the restriction of black education became a popular campaign topic among white politicians.

The extreme inadequacy of public funding meant that black schools in the South had to depend upon individual initiative and community support, making them public-private hybrids. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the new philanthropic foundations created by the industrial fortunes of men like Carnegie and Rockefeller attempted to mitigate the South's backwardness and also to provide a semblance of uniformity with respect to standards. The huge disparities between black and white schools persisted, however, as long as blacks lacked political power and as long as the plantation economy survived. Only after 1940, when the demand for black agricultural labor rapidly declined, and when the Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were illegal, did black schools begin to approach the standard of white schools. However, despite judicial intervention, increased federal funding, and attempts to foster national standards, public education remains balkanized and unequal. The Supreme Court has affirmed the essentially local nature of public schools—meaning no integration across district lines—and endorsed the constitutionality of funding differences between individual school districts. These decisions encouraged re-segregation and exacerbated the funding gap between city (black) and suburban (white) schools. The existence of a large private school sector, and the fact that religious schools stand outside the public school system, further disadvantage the public schools, especially those in the cities.