

**Kozol, J. (2006, Jan-Feb.) Change can't come without protest. *International Socialist Review*. 33-37.**

FIFTY YEARS after Brown v. Board of Education, the landmark Supreme Court decision against school segregation, segregated public schools are back. In Chicago, for example, almost 90 percent of public school students are Black or Latino, attending crumbling, overcrowded, and underfunded schools. JONATHAN KOZOL, a writer, educator, and activist, is an award-winning author of numerous books, including *Savage Inequalities* and *Death at an Early Age*. His latest book is *Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*. In it he argues, "Whether the issue is inequity alone or deepening resegregation or the labyrinthine intertwining of the two, it is well past the time for us to start the work that it will take to change this. If it takes people marching in the streets and other forms of adamant disruption of the governing civilities...these are prices we should be prepared to pay." SARAH KNOPP, a high school social studies teacher in Los Angeles, spoke to him about the topic of his new book.

**OF ALL the discussion about education reform today, *Shame of the Nation* really rips the veil off of segregation in our public school system. For a long time, people have been concerned with how to make segregated schools better. How is your condemnation of segregation being received?**

I think I'm getting a more positive and more massive response than I got when I wrote my book *Death at an Early Age* in 1968. I've had larger audiences than at any point since 1968, which was the high point of the civil rights movement. Of course the neoliberals and the neoconservatives are attacking me for suggesting that we are operating apartheid schools, but generally the overall reaction has been outrage and shock that the clock has been turned back so far. The truth is that most Americans were not aware that segregation has come back with such a sweeping vengeance into public education. An awful lot of people assume that if an issue isn't being discussed for a period of years, it must be that it's gotten better, but this is not the case. In fact, the proportion of Black kids who go to integrated schools has dropped to its lowest level since 1968. And during this period the race gap between Black and Latino kids on the one hand, and white kids on the other, has widened progressively. At the moment, the average Black or Latino twelfth-grader reads at the level of the average white seventh-grader. And that's not even taking into consideration the vast numbers of inner-city kids that don't even get to the twelfth grade.

**WHY DO you use the term "apartheid schools" in the title of your book?**

I use the term apartheid because we're not speaking of schools that are just mildly segregated; we're speaking of schools which have virtually no white children at all. And whether the forces of segregation are legal forces, as they were fifty years ago, or socioeconomic forces, as they are today, makes absolutely no difference to the children that we conceal and isolate, and then shortchange.

**HOW BIG is the gap between these schools and better schools, either in terms of funding or in terms of the overall environment?**

The difference in provisions for these children are unmistakable in almost every section of the nation. In New York City, there are kids I know in the South Bronx that get \$11,000 a year put into their public education. Children of my Harvard classmates, meanwhile, living in the beautiful suburb of Manhasset, get \$22,000 a year. The consequences are much larger class sizes, far less experienced teachers, decrepit and frequently degrading buildings, tremendous overcrowding, and most of all a tremendous gap in academic achievement. It's not only in resources but also in outcomes that the consequences of apartheid are felt. This is years after No Child Left Behind (NCLB) went into effect and

ten years since the accountability movement took over our urban schools. So we see vast differences on the one hand in terms of input, money, and resources, and at the other end in terms of outcomes, where the achievement gap between the races is wider than it has been in years.

**YOU CITE a survey done by Gary Orfield at Harvard that says that 60 percent of young adults feel that the federal government should ensure that schools are integrated. So why don't we see more of a fightback around this issue?**

First of all, to underline that point, 60 percent of young people of all races feel not only that they will receive a better education in an integrated setting, but that the federal government should make sure that it happens. And overwhelming majorities of Black parents are convinced that their children will receive a better education in an integrated school. That hasn't changed, despite the handful of bombastic separatists who have airtime on right-wing TV. There are a number of reasons why these massive numbers of young people have not risen up in a strong and passionate political reaction. First, the mainstream media has dodged this issue for so long and to this day avoids it so skillfully that most people are unaware of how dramatically the racial divide has widened. Second, these young people themselves, whether they are privileged white kids or Black and Latino kids in the inner-city schools have been indoctrinated to a degree in the acceptance of reality as it stands, instead of being empowered by their education to challenge that reality. Now this isn't true in all schools; there are plenty of teachers in all schools who do try very hard to deliver an empowering education, but the overall thrust of education has a domesticating effect.

**IF THERE was a period of integration after the civil rights movement that had some success, when did things start moving backward? When was the turning point, and why did the clock get turned back?**

First of all, I wouldn't start by saying "if." There was a period of serious integration between 1965 and 1990 that was dramatically successful in almost any terms. Tens of thousands of public schools throughout the nation became integrated. And despite the revisionist history from the conservatives, for the most part they were a great success. During that same period, the gap in test scores between the races narrowed, diminished more dramatically than at any other time in history.

It all came crashing to a halt in the 1990s when the Supreme Court, the Rehnquist Court, essentially, and the district courts began to dismantle the enforcement mechanisms of desegregation so that school districts would be freed from being required to integrate as long as they had demonstrated a good effort over a period of years. The Supreme Court ruled that integration orders could not be extended endlessly even if the schools remained segregated. So at this point the federal courts took it one step farther. Aside from not forcing schools to desegregate, they also began to stop voluntary integration programs, freeing the states from the obligation to pay for those programs.

The reason that school integration came to a halt in the early 1990s was not because of the objections of either Black or white members of the population. The overwhelming majority of parents of all races believe that racially integrated schooling is better not only for Black kids and Latino kids, but also is better for white children as well. Every poll demonstrates this clearly. Wherever voluntary programs exist, you have four or five applicants for every opening. Do Black and Latino parents believe in school integration? You bet they do. When the opportunity is real. Unfortunately, as a result of the courts and practices of President Bush at the present moment, the level of segregation in our schools has reverted back to a level that we haven't seen since 1968.

**GEORGE BUSH talks about the "soft bigotry of low expectations" for students of color. On the other hand, others, even some progressives, might think that to say that Black kids need to learn next to their white counterparts is condescending. What would you say to these arguments?**

The first one is outrageous. George Bush has finally struck on a phrase that he can pronounce and

he just keeps repeating it. Overwhelming numbers of teachers that I meet in the inner-city schools of Los Angeles, Seattle, St. Louis, Chicago, and New York City, to name a few, the overwhelming number of these teachers are forging relationships with their students and helping to empower them. More idealistic and talented young people are going into teaching than I've ever seen before. They are steeped in the civil rights tradition. They either learn it from their parents, who were active participants in the movement, or they learn it from good multicultural education at some of the best colleges in America. We're getting more racially sensitive and politically insightful teachers into our public schools than at any point in the forty years that I've been involved in public education. So the president has simply struck on one of the few syntactically effective sentences— phrases; it's not a complete sentence—that he can pronounce, and keeps repeating it.

The other argument that you make, well that's the classic Clarence Thomas argument. He satirizes those who think that integration is a good idea, and he says that that's like saying that Black kids will get smarter if they're sitting next to white kids. This is a classic example of shooting at clay pigeons, since no integrationist I've ever known has made such an ignorant and insulting argument. The issue is not intelligence; the Black and Latino inner-city children that I know are every bit as smart as the children of doctors and lawyers and business CEOs with whom I grew up in the suburbs. Often they're much smarter. Students that I met [in an inner-city classroom in Los Angeles] were more insightful, eloquent, and nuanced in their thinking than many of the suburban kids I meet. And their capability for higher order skills exceeded most members of the U.S. Senate. They certainly exceeded those of the governor of California.

The issue isn't intelligence; the issue— and this is why Black parents in overwhelming numbers favor integration—is that power follows money in this country. Black people have understood for decades that the best way to guarantee that their child will receive a top-grade education is to make sure that they're in a classroom with significant numbers of children of the middle class and children of those who are politically powerful. It is only when we totally isolate Black and Latino kids that we can cheat them with impunity, because only when they're isolated can we starve their schools of high-quality resources and not damage our "own" children—by our own, I'm speaking as a white man. White Americans, whatever their decency or bias, will guarantee that a school is good if their own children participate in that school. That's why Black and Latino parents understand that a racial and class mix within a school is virtually the only guarantee that their children will not be one, isolated; two, concealed; and three, cheated. That's why overwhelming numbers of Black folks continue to show their support for integration. The consistent support for integrated education among white folks is also important here.

As Orfield notes, the strongest opposition to integrated schooling among white people is among those who have never experienced it. Genuine participation in integrated schooling, when it's done in a wise and sensitive way, is consistently the basis for support of integration by white people. When they don't know anything about it, when their children have never been in an integrated setting, when they've never been in an integrated setting, they oppose it. We oppose what we fear, and we fear what we don't know.

**IN THE book, you talk about three cities that have relatively successful integration programs; Milwaukee, St. Louis, and Boston. What makes these programs successful and why do parents of all races support them?**

I've just been back in all three cities since my visit to L.A., and in all three cities we've discussed these issues again. First of all, why do white parents support the programs? I'm not sure, but I'll tell you what I intuit from talking to so many people in these districts. Number one, they genuinely believe that it will be better for their own children to learn about the world that they really live in when they're seven or twelve years old and not have to wait until they're twenty-five or thirty and discover that they don't know how to negotiate with people of other races. Ultimately, it's enlightened self-interest.

Second, in the cases of some districts where there are a great many Latino children, many white parents strongly favor bilingual schools. And I don't mean bilingual in the sense that it's bandied about in California politics, where it's an issue only applying to Latinos. I mean bilingual education for all races. I just spent some time in Milwaukee with the teachers from a spectacular bilingual elementary school

where the white, Black, and Latino kids by fifth grade are speaking two languages comfortably.

Third reason, I happen to think, is a strong residual sense of ethics and fair play in the American character. No matter what our president does, no matter what our Supreme Court does, no matter what our state politicians do, the fact is that most Americans I meet genuinely do believe in fair play and they don't want their children to win a game that was rigged against poor children from the starting gate. They genuinely want to believe in and be proud of the country, and don't want to live in an apartheid society. I think this is basically a good country, plagued with a rotten core, largely manipulated by corporate donors. But I think that beneath that perfidious superstructure, there is a core of decency in this nation. And that's why I think that *Shame of the Nation* has become a bestseller. Because it does attribute the potential for doing the right thing to the people at the grassroots.

**SOME TEACHERS' organizations and Democrats say that for No Child Left Behind to work, it needs to be properly funded. In other words, give us the tools we need to meet these testing goals, and we will meet them. Do you think that that's the right take on NCLB? Does it just need to be better funded?**

I would answer that in two stages, because it's important to me to be realistic in terms of what our teachers, teachers' unions, and administrators need to deal with. If we're going to be stuck with NCLB much longer, I certainly would demand that it be not only fully funded according to initial promises made by Mr. Bush when he deceived the Democrats into supporting it, but that it be funded in very different ways; that the funding be redirected not to relentless testing but to very expensive and valuable intervention programs that start before our children even enter school. If any of the Democrats in the Senate ask my advice about the reauthorization of NCLB, which will come up in 2007, I would say that if you support it at all, it's essential that you make any testing aspect at all of NCLB conditional on a guarantee of: three years of full day rich developmental pre-K for every low-income child, a reduction of class size in every inner-city school, including Fremont High (which has a typical average of thirty-five to forty students), to the same class of eighteen students that kids have in the suburbs, and that other additional money be allocated to school needs for buildings in which most of our poorest Black and Latino kids have to spend thirteen years of their lives. In other words, I would say to the Democrats that if you're going to support the reauthorization of NCLB, you have an obligation to make it conditional on fully funded pre-K, small class sizes, and reconstruction of crumbling buildings.

But I would also say that NCLB is flawed to start with. Yes, if there is going to be testing, than you must have the conditions that I just stipulated or the testing will be unfair. But my own belief is that the entire ethos and philosophy behind NCLB is badly flawed. It's not a new idea, it's a throwback to the old idea of Taylorism and the utilitarianism of the so-called Age of Efficiency at the beginning of the 1900s, when the likes of Elwood Cubberly<sup>1</sup> (who's quoted at the beginning of my book at length) and Edward Thorndike (who was one of the designers of the IQ test) designed the first round of testing and accountability. It's a throwback to that concept. We've had enough time now to see if it was successful. It hasn't worked. Since NCLB went into effect and even earlier than that, since many states instituted testing and accountability practices similar to NCLB, the race gap has widened. So even in the terms that the president promotes, it's been a failure. He just hasn't discovered it yet.

The other point is that the testing and accountability agenda have created a state of siege in inner-city schools whereby principals, even very decent ones, have been terrorized to the point of forcing their faculties to teach to the test, in many schools only to the test, with the result that teachers not only have to forfeit their creativity, but also have to forfeit their personalities. In many schools where every moment of the day must be spent "on task" and where the task is dictated by an accountability regime, you have teachers who stop sharing stories from their own lives, or even worse, can't allow a student to share a story from his or her own existence so that a child's heartache, or whim, or humor—since they can't be tested—become unimportant. Critical thinking can't really be tested—so it becomes unimportant. So that's the calamitous effect that NCLB has had on our segregated schools. It hasn't had this effect on the richest schools because those schools all know their kids are going to do okay anyway. So they don't like the tests, but they don't allow the testing regime to take up a year of test prep and they don't allow it to distort genuine instruction. In so many schools, it's a tragedy to go to school, whereas it should be a

joy.

**IN LOS Angeles, many of these so-called failing schools are being threatened by takeover by charter schools. For example, Jefferson High, a school with low Adequate Yearly Progress scores, may be taken over by a company called Green Dot. What do you think of the argument that charter schools, by cutting back on bureaucracy and making decisions more locally, will improve education?**

In rare occasions, a charter school created by teachers in the public system and in collaboration with activist parents in the community have had at least short-term success. But the overwhelming majority of charter schools in the country today are: number one, even more segregated than traditional public schools. They tend very quickly—even when they're started by teachers with the best intentions—to enter into collaboration with the private sector, and many charter schools throughout the nation are now operated if not owned by private companies like Edison. They have repeatedly promised improvements in test scores and then resorted to Dickensian methods to deliver their promises. They never achieve enduring gains because their students in middle school, by the time they get to high school, are every bit as far behind as their counterparts in regular schools.

In the long run, charter schools are being strategically used to pave the way for vouchers. The voucher advocates, who are very powerful and funded by right-wing foundations and families, recognize that the word voucher has been successfully discredited by enlightened Americans who believe in the public sector. So they've resorted to two strategies. First, they no longer use the word "vouchers." They've adopted the seemingly benign phrase "school choice," but they are still voucher advocates.

Secondly, they have now shrewdly decided the best way to break down the resistance to vouchers is by supporting charters, which represent a halfway step in the same direction. One of the intentions of this, by creating selective institutions, usually with extra forms of funding, is to discredit the entire public enterprise in America. We already have privatization of the military, as we've seen with the private military contractors in Iraq; we've seen the privatization of the prison system. Well the next step is the privatization of the public schools. It's a matter of ideology. These people truly believe that private competition is the solution to the problems we face. I wholeheartedly disagree and think the record will show that this is not true. And I think anyone who's been flying lately in the deregulated airline industry certainly will question whether unregulated competition benefits the consumer.

They see a huge opening for private profit. Public education may well be the largest piece of the public sector that has not yet been taken over by private corporations. I forget the exact number, but it might be an \$80 billion dollar opportunity for private interests. Those that support vouchers and charter schools may be determined to smash the last significant sectors of organized labor in the nation, by which I'm referring to the NEA [National Education Association] and the AFT [American Federation of Teachers]. Corporate society has been trying to smash unions for decades, so I think they see the teachers' unions as a particularly powerful adversary in part because teachers are well educated and know enough about history to recognize the absolutely crucial role for teachers in our society. Many charter schools are already allowed to hire nonunion teachers, or are allowed to hire teachers through various back channels that are not allowed in the public schools.

That's what I think about charter schools. There are a few good ones. They've had a very spotty record. More have been failures than successes, and their ultimate agenda has been insidious and dangerous.

**A LOT of times you hear people calling for getting rid of "bad teachers."**

Of course there are some mediocre teachers, just as there are some mediocre doctors and lawyers and business CEOs. But the task is not to launch a witch-hunt for a handful of ineffective teachers, it's to find a way to keep the marvelous teachers we're recruiting in the public schools. There are only a few ways to do it. Number one, we've got to reduce class size so that they can be more effective in academic terms and so that teachers can remain human beings. A teacher who has a warm marvelous empowering relationship with a class of twenty is almost forced to turn into a traffic cop with a class of

forty. Most teachers did not go to school to become traffic cops.

Second, fix the physical buildings, so that they don't feel they're spending their careers in a garbage heap. Very few business people that I know would be content to spend one week in the typical urban inner-city school of California, and yet we expect teachers to work there for their whole lives.

And finally, we need to pay teachers enough so that we can keep these young idealists, not just where they're flying high off their last sociology course in college, but so that they can lead a dignified life and earn a dignified income. This isn't going to come about by writing letters to the editor or by making plaintive appeals to politicians, who in general break their promises, which I've seen many times over the course of my forty-year career. We certainly cannot look to the federal courts, not the Supreme Court that's now in power.

We need to build a grassroots movement, and it's got to start with the people who are the best witnesses to these injustices, which are the teachers themselves. Yes, tens of thousands of students in college and graduate school will support us. Hundreds of thousands of older people, some of whom remember and participated in the civil rights movement, will support us. And yes, a lot of the enlightened churches in the nation will support us. I would say parenthetically to those who are agnostic, it would be a mistake not to enlist the support of some of the very progressive religious denominations, in particular the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Presbyterians, and the Methodist Church, all of which have given very strong support to my work. We're going to get support from all those groups if we launch the appeal in powerful terms.

You can't change anything in the United States without disruptive nonviolent protest, and I'm very convinced that it's going to take another round of that to win this battle.

1 Elwood Cubberly was a turn-of-the-century historian who advocated factory-style schooling for the working class. For him, teachers were like factory workers and the students the raw material to be molded.