

# Operation King's Dream: A Call to Action Restoring the Promise of *Brown v. Board of Education* Starting in Michigan

## It's Time to End Separate and Unequal Education for All Detroit Students

For the first time in forty years, Detroit students and parents have the power to win equal, quality education for the young people of Detroit. Over the last five years, the metropolitan Detroit area has been turning into a regional school district. Every day, tens of thousands of Detroit students get on buses to attend schools in Detroit suburbs. Students from Southfield, Oak Park and other school districts use the Detroit address of a relative or family friend to attend Renaissance, Cass Tech and Martin Luther King High Schools and other Detroit schools. What was considered impossible – majority white suburbs seeking out and welcoming Detroit students to their districts, and black Detroit parents putting their sons and daughters on buses to attend school in those suburban districts – is happening on a mass basis every day.

The regionalization of education is currently developing in an unplanned and haphazard manner. If left unplanned and uncoordinated, it will result in the creation of a whole new Jim Crow education system for Detroit youth. However, if we act, the people of Detroit could finally win the right of every Detroit student – those in DPS, those in private and public charters and those in suburban schools – to attend first-class, high-quality, integrated schools.

Detroit has the power to do what almost no other school district in the country can do: make *Brown v Board of Education* a

living reality. Winning this history-making gain will require the people of Detroit to follow bold, farsighted leaders committed to building the new, youth-led, integrated, mass civil rights movement on an independent basis.

We have the courage and the new optimism we need to try the impossible and win. We just need to get started.

Understanding the causes of the education crisis gripping Detroit and its surrounding districts is key to winning. Charters and suburban public school districts are spending thousands of dollars on fancy advertising campaigns to beg Detroit students to come to their districts because they desperately need the state per-pupil allowance of \$7,400 that goes with every student they recruit. In addition, poorer Detroit students bring close to \$3,000 of additional federal funding with them to any school in which poor students are the majority.

This whole situation gives Detroit the leverage to say, “If you want our money, you must give us the same opportunities and the same quality of education that you provide your own residents. You have neither the right nor the ability to teach us if you see Detroit students as walking dollar signs or as inferior and second class.”

## How Suburban Schools Implement the New Jim Crow

Ferndale provides a classic example of the Jim Crow system that the suburbs are creating on the basis of the Michigan “Schools of Choice Act,” which gives school districts the right to pick and choose which of their schools they open to non-residents.

One school, Ferndale High School (FHS), is reserved for Ferndale, Pleasant Ridge, Royal Oak and Oak Park **residents only**. It is racially integrated, 60% black, 40% white, offers 20 Advanced Placement (AP) courses, five foreign languages, access to enrichment classes through the Center for Advanced Studies and the Arts, six career pathways, a broad range of electives, complete sports, music and art programs, an open campus, and no dress code. Guidance counselors and other auxiliary staff make the student to teacher/staff ratio 12 to 1.

The high school open to Detroit and other out-of-district students is Ferndale’s public charter, cynically and misleadingly

named *University High School (UHS)*. Ferndale’s UHS is 98% black, has only three AP offerings, next-to no sports, music or art programs, next-to no electives, offers only Spanish as a foreign language, requires uniforms, has a closed campus and offers only one career pathway. Because UHS has almost no auxiliary staff, its student to teacher/staff ratio is 26 to 1.

UHS promises to place all prospective students in internships with the automobile companies, but in reality it places only a handful of students. Most students at UHS are receiving an education designed to place them in a low-paying technical job rather than a college classroom.

Ferndale is clearly using some of the per-pupil allocation it gets from its Detroit students to help provide its *own* residents with an integrated, diverse, quality, college preparatory education, while offering an inferior, segregated, largely technical

education to *Detroit* students. **Ferndale is relying on prejudice and baseless, degrading and racist stereotypes of Detroit students to act as if it is doing Detroit a big favor by allowing Detroit students to attend school in Ferndale. The truth is that Ferndale is just skimming off Detroit students' revenues to pay for Ferndale's rising education costs.** This is separate and unequal. This is state-sponsored discrimination.

## **Prejudice Backfires on the Suburbs – Segregation is our Mutual Enemy**

Ferndale is not alone in implementing discriminatory policies against Detroit students. Several other suburban districts are creating public charters or utilizing other policies which discriminate against Detroit students. The actions being taken by Ferndale and Detroit's other suburban neighbors flow directly from the right-wing, free-market, and pro-charter attacks on public education, which began under Governor Engler's administration, and are now being pushed by both conservatives and liberals all over the country.

Several of Michigan's educational funding policies, including Proposal A and other school finance/property tax reforms, were created under the misguided and often racist theory that Oakland and Macomb counties could thrive and develop even if Detroit remained poor and under-resourced. Suburban politicians and taxpayers pushed for school funding reforms that they believed would provide their communities with enough state aid to maintain their communities and school systems. Now those

## **Detroit Must Lead the Struggle In Order for Metro Detroit to Prosper**

The economic and social viability of every Detroit suburb rests on making Detroit a strong and vibrant economic anchor for the whole tri-county area. Further, no urban area can grow or prosper without a strong, public education system. All the theories which centered on creating a vast network of smaller suburban centers to grow the economy have failed to achieve anything. Everyone knows this.

If Detroiters can just recognize our strength, organize it, follow leaders who are strong rather than those who are the cynical and corrupt bidders for the charter school companies, or simply too scared to stand up to the right wing, then we could stop the seemingly endless rounds of attacks on our schools emanating from Lansing. Governor Granholm and other politicians recognize the central importance of Detroit to the prosperity of the whole tri-county area. For that reason, these politicians are calling for a moratorium on the Cobo Hall debt.

But the education of our youth is far more important to the future of the region than a convention center. Detroit had millions of dollars squandered or stolen under the state takeover. We have been forced to incur millions of dollars of new debt because of Lansing's failed policies. Granting a moratorium on the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) debt and returning the revenues we lost under the state

This is what *Brown v. Board of Education* declared illegal, unjust and unfair in 1954. At a moment when America is being challenged to elect its first black president, it is unacceptable for black, Latina/o and other minority youth of Detroit to be stigmatized and offered little to no good educational opportunities in either Detroit or suburban public or charter schools.

same funding schemes aimed at punishing Detroit and attracting new home owners and businesses to the suburbs, are creating an insoluble budget crisis for virtually every middle class suburban and rural Michigan school district. Only the wealthiest suburban school districts which have the ability to offset rising education costs with private funds and which are entitled to spend more than \$12,000 of tax revenues per pupil, compared to the \$7,400 allocated to many middle class districts, are able to survive the policies they pushed forward.

Every school district is looking for ways to avoid making cuts in school staff or programs. Each one is in a mad competition with each other to recruit out-of-district students to attend school in their districts. But instead of raiding Detroit, suburban school districts can improve education for their students and for Detroit students by uniting with Detroit, in a joint fight for increased and equitable funding for *all* school districts in Michigan, and for a rational, consolidated, unified, tri-county public school system.

takeover are just and fair demands that we can win – but only if we fight.

The massive school closings of 2007 left entire Detroit neighborhoods with no schools. The predictable and terrible overcrowding in the high schools, caused by the school closings, has led to more violence, more students dropping out, less education taking place in the classroom and more student, teacher and staff demoralization and hopelessness. Detroit parents and students, loyal to DPS, are leaving the district because they feel that they have no other option.

The only way to break free from the vicious cycle – in which cuts and closures force students to withdraw from the district, and then student withdrawal leads to more cuts and closures – is for Detroit to exercise its muscle and fight for our city's right to control the quality and character of education that Detroit students receive wherever we go to school. But this requires unleashing the power of Detroit students, something which only BAMN has been prepared to do, and combining that power with the power of the teachers' union and other city unions, parent and community organizations and any other forces prepared to fight for a bright future for Detroit. If we move in this direction, we can save public education in this region and defeat the imposition of second rate charters on Detroit.

## **A Plan of Action to Win: It's Time to Fight Like the Old Civil Rights Movement and Build the New Civil Rights Movement**

Charter schools exist for one purpose: to make money. They must be free of public regulation and scrutiny, free to use non-certified teachers, outmoded teaching techniques, and specifically free of having a diverse student body, in order to profit. If the elected Detroit School Board would hold public hearings on the practices of charter schools – public and private, Detroit and suburban – instead of trying to imitate their cost-saving, ridiculous, education-failing “reforms”, it could gain control over the charters and in doing so, stop their growth. Just holding charter schools accountable will stop large charter companies from ever entering Detroit.

Public and private charters that refuse to be accountable to Detroit and its elected School Board could be easily closed down by an old-fashioned BAM/BAMN “**OPEN THEM UP OR WE WILL SHUT THEM DOWN**” campaign. The aim of such a campaign would be to make both public and private charters attended by Detroit students open to the scrutiny, regulation and control of Detroit or face boycotts, legal action or special legislation aimed at shutting them down.

Detroiters must take pride in the strength of our city and gain confidence from our understanding that the black communities have provided the leadership needed to win every progressive gain in this nation’s history. At the same time, we cannot treat the isolation our city has been placed in for so long as a virtue. Racial segregation and isolation do not and can not benefit Detroit. The power of the black communities is always greatest when we are fighting to end separate and unequal, to integrate

every aspect of this society and to demand to be treated as the peers and equals of everyone. When we are following Dr. King’s example, building and leading an integrated civil rights movement, fighting for freedom and equality and for the rights of all the oppressed, our power is limitless.

The whole greater-Detroit area is becoming much more culturally diverse, with new, vibrant and growing Asian, Arab, Chaldean and Latina/o communities being established throughout the tri-county area. The growing strength of the Latina/o communities are completely changing the character of civil rights struggles and racial politics in this region and across the country.

Unity of the black, Latina/o, Arab, and other immigrant communities is the key to victory. If we allow our communities to be divided, by subscribing to the pervasive anti-immigrant or racial prejudices that have kept us weak and separated, all attempts to improve education for the students of Metro Detroit will fail. Together, united in a single integrated movement, we can defeat the racist response to Michigan’s changing demographics. Educational segregation to preserve white privilege, the long-standing aim of charter school, voucher and other privatization efforts and all the attacks on affirmative action, are not only increasingly unpopular; they are politically and socially unviable. Diverse and integrated schools, which are what the vast majority of Michigan’s young people of all races want to attend, are now not only possible, but represent the only solution to the crisis of public education confronting this region.

### **Our Immediate Task: End School Segregation in Ferndale and Other Suburbs**

Making rational and reasonable arguments will not win the demand for consolidating the 80+ districts in the tri-county area into a unitary, public, integrated, quality school district. The suburbs’ need for Detroit student dollars gives the students, parents, teachers and the whole city of Detroit the *power* to *win* this fight. We have to begin this fight where we are strong. Stopping the illegal, unfair, and unjust policy of placing Detroit students in segregated, separate and unequal schools is the strongest basis from which to launch our campaign.

Starting with Ferndale, and then expanding to the other districts which are exploiting the desperation of Detroit parents and students, we must demand that Ferndale and other suburban districts open **all** their schools to Detroit students, improve the quality of the schools currently being attended by Detroit students, and equalize the educational offerings at all their schools. We must demand that Ferndale and other suburban school districts combine their public charters and resident-only public schools into a single, seamless school system, with student placement being determined by a lottery or some other fair, non-discriminatory and equitable process. Every school will be improved if every school is integrated, and every district

will integrate all their schools if the choices are either to racially and geographically integrate their schools or degrade their own district schools and then go under financially.

We should urge Ferndale and other districts to do the right thing. If they resist, it is time for us to employ the tactics of Dr. King. No one would eat at a Ferndale restaurant that segregates black from white, or Ferndale residents from Detroit residents, and there is no reason why we should accept such a policy when it is applied to our students. **We must boycott, rally and march on any district that insists on segregating and stigmatizing Detroit students. We can end the New Jim Crow the same way we ended the old Jim Crow.**

The suburbs of Metropolitan Detroit are in favor of regionalizing all the valuable and/or profitable institutions of the City of Detroit, such as the DIA, the zoo and the water and sewerage department. We should demand that regionalizing, integrating and making equitable public education in Metropolitan Detroit be a prerequisite to any negotiations regarding regionalization of any more of Detroit’s assets.

## **Detroit Students Are the Peers and Equals of All Other Michigan Students: We Will Not Accept Being Stigmatized or Treated as Inferior**

We must stop the Michigan state government and our state universities from overseeing and justifying the New Jim Crow. We must go to the regents of the public and private universities sponsoring the charter schools, including Lawrence Tech, which is involved with Ferndale's University High School, and tell them to stop promoting, stop profiting from and stop providing the ideological basis for the development of the New Jim Crow.

The "educational policies" that these institutions claim are needed to help black Detroit students to learn – rigid, structured, limited curriculum offerings, military discipline, uniforms, overcrowded schools devoid of art, music, joy and creativity – are never advocated for white suburban students. The same opportunity to learn how to think critically, to be exposed to all kinds of different subject matter and learning techniques, and to sit in diverse and small class rooms, settings that these university administrators and regents seek for their own children's education, are exactly what the students of Metro

Detroit need to really shine and develop. We should settle for nothing less.

Public schools in Detroit, like Renaissance High School, are already becoming flagship magnet schools for Metro Detroit. If Detroit and our suburban school districts join together and pool our resources, we can accelerate this process and offer a vast number of better and different public educational programs for all children. Together, we could create magnet fine arts, science and other specialized public schools equivalent to New York's famed public high schools, Bronx Science, Brooklyn Tech, Stuyvesant, and the "Fame" High School for the Performing Arts. Expensive but vital special needs services and gifted and talented programs, currently floundering in small financially strapped districts, would flourish in a large consolidated district. Public and private charters that pretend to be high-quality "university schools" or "educational academies" could be replaced by truly excellent and varied school choices.

### **Only the Youth of Detroit Can Lead This Historic Effort**

The young people of Detroit must take the lead in order for us to win this bold plan of action. Detroit students and youth have been playing a decisive role in building the new, integrated civil rights movement. Detroit and other Michigan high school and middle school students led the organizing campaign to defend affirmative action and to realize the promise of *Brown* that culminated with the 50,000-person march on Washington on April 1, 2003.

In the spring of 2006, Latina/o and immigrant students throughout Michigan joined millions of other Latina/o and immigrant youth and successfully organized to defeat the anti-immigrant federal HR4437. The mass mobilizations of 2006 placed the questions of civil rights, equality and an end to second-class treatment for Latina/o, black, Asian, Arab and other minorities, back on the American political agenda. Senator Obama would not be the Democratic candidate for President if not for the determined action of young people who believe that American society can be united by a common vision of hope, rather than hopelessly divided by racism and bigotry.

Detroit youth are now in a position to make the conclusion of *Brown v Board of Education*, that separate can never be equal

and that integration is necessary for equality, into a living reality for youth in Metro Detroit, and through our example, for young people across the country.

If we lead, others will follow.

Young people are always at the forefront of successful civil rights struggles. Inspired by the dedication of young, black leaders, most importantly, the young Dr. Martin Luther King, young people of all races stood shoulder to shoulder, fought together, and defeated the old Jim Crow. We can beat the New Jim Crow if the young people of Detroit step forward to build and to lead the new civil rights movement. Building this movement is the only way we can assure that people of all races, the oppressed and the poor, are treated with the dignity and respect we all deserve and desire. We are living in an era in which many young people are embracing hope and rejecting cynicism.

Change that once seemed impossible now looks inevitable. But it will not occur without our leadership. The time to fight and to win is now.

**Endorsers:** The Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action, Integration & Immigrant Rights and Fight for Equality By Any Means Necessary (BAMN); The Progressive Alliance of the University of Michigan; Minority and Women Affairs Advisory Committee of the Wayne State University Student Council; Wayne State University Students for Choice; John Riehl, President of AFSCME Local 207; The Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning at the University of Michigan; Sanctuary Fellowship Baptist Church

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