



Racial Justice Lunch and Learn Meetings

“In *Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger*, the veteran journalist Justin Murphy makes the compelling argument that the educational disparities in Rochester, New York, are the result of historical and present-day racial segregation. Education reform alone will never be the full solution; to resolve racial inequity, cities such as Rochester must first dismantle segregation.”
<https://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/book/9781501761867/your-children-are-very-greatly-in-danger/>

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CtinKffhmFc> (April 2023 [43 mins])



Justin Murphy discusses Rochester’s history of systemic racism in Rochester and in the Rochester City School District. Murphy is a Democrat and Chronical staff writer, and the author of *Your Children are Very Greatly in Danger* (Cornell University Press, 2022). He grew up in Penfield. In this PathStone presentation, Murphy unpacks how segregation in the RCSD and students’ low academic achievement came to be. He pushes back at prevailing arguments that a combination of the union, the school board, the administration, charter schools, and/or state education are to blame. While there are “elements of truth” to finger pointing, Murphy says that those arguments ignore our parallel patterns in housing, health care and criminal justice [among poor, urban Black families]; and that the arguments also ignore that Rochester is not unique.

Richard Rothstein, author of *The Color of Law*, a seminal book about how redlining created the extreme wealth gap enriching whites (over Black and Brown people), on a visit to Rochester, explained that what happened here is the pattern of segregation and poverty mirrored throughout the United States. If we want to understand our racial history, we need to see how our policies fit into those in the national landscape.

The effect of the Great Migration was experienced later in Rochester than it was for most Northern cities. Rochester was almost completely white in the early 1950s. The reason being that Black people couldn’t get employment here because Kodak and other employers tightly controlled hiring. In a 1939 state study, Kodak had 16,000 employees; 1 was Black. Blacks, and then Puerto Ricans began coming here in the mid late 50s through the exploitive agricultural system and then moved to the city-- where redlining and racial covenants pushed them into the 4th and 7th wards, areas walled off by the river, railroad tracks and then highways.

Murphy reminds us of the difference between de jure segregation (where physical, legal or other barriers to integration were intentionally constructed) and de facto (where segregation “just” occurred by personal choice or circumstances). In Rochester, there has been a great desire to believe that the latter was the case, but within housing and the RCSD, de jure segregation is easily documented. For example, a new East High School was built in 1959. It was incredibly expensive, well-equipped, lauded and got buzz everywhere. Right before the new East High opened, the boundaries determining which students could attend were changed, excising a Black neighborhood whose students who previously attended the school.

In the mid-1960s, a decade after the Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* case, data demonstrated how RCSD schools were segregated and the district “offered” an open enrollment program that would allow Black families whose children attended overcrowded schools to be bussed to white schools. Despite that the language in the initiative was laced with racism, large numbers of Black families were interested in moving their children... *until* white parents traveled through Black neighborhoods with veiled threats telling the families that moving schools would not be a good idea. There was another initiative to target desegregation through mixing youth from predominantly white middle and high schools, with youth from schools where the student body was Black or Brown. That plan was met with white parents, carrying weapons, throwing rocks, and verbally threatening Black youth who took the busses to their “new school.” (Murphy’s book cover shows a photo of screaming white parents demonstrating outside Charlotte High School.) Neither the Republicans nor the Democrats stepped in to address the problem of violence against the youth. However, the RCSD school board membership was raised from 5 to 7 with new members running on an anti-busing slate.

During this entire time period (and into the next decades), white families left the city, populating newly developing suburban districts. Then, a 1974 Supreme Court decision (Michigan’s) *Milliken v. Bradley* stated that desegregation orders could not breach the district in which they were mandated. This meant that white families fleeing RCSD schools could not face a court ordered desegregation remedy.

Zooming into the present, Murphy describes that experts find that, 1.) desegregation and 2.) funding are what is needed to improve student achievement within RCSD schools. But because of white flight, half of the equation is no longer on the table (as we currently organize school districts). Murphy presents data showing that Black children attending desegregated schools for even one year earn 10% more than their peers who never attended integrated schools. Similarly, high school graduation rates are higher, incarceration rates lower and improved health can be documented among Black adults who attended integrated schools. Rucker Johnson who led that study said, **“Like the vaccines that saved lives... integration is an unmitigated good.”**

Justin Murphy, in his book makes three recommendations to address Rochester area segregation and inequities that would benefit RCSD children and youth *and* children and youth in metropolitan Rochester:

- A comprehensive report on potential major metropolitan reforms in education and other areas, including the viability of a unified countywide school system.
- Witten policies for greater equity in enrollment and participation for suburban districts in Urban-Suburban.
- Intensive antiracism education for children and adults in all Rochester-area school districts.

Additional Resources:

Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York by Justin Murphy (review) <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/902923>

<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/418/717/> *Milliken v. Bradley*1074