

RESEGREGATION: A CASE STUDY OF THE FAILURE  
OF THE COLOR BLIND IDEAL IN  
K-12 SCHOOLING POLICY

by

KATHLEEN M. KINSLOW

A DISSERTATION

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## ABSTRACT

Given the current trend for school districts to reorganize once unitary status is achieved, a cultural ethnography was conducted to determine how high school students experienced the inevitable resegregation in their school system.

The findings of this study reinforced and extended the arguments Kenneth Clark presented about the deleterious effects of social and school segregation on Black children in the court cases leading up to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Like the child participants in his famous doll experiments, students assigned to the all Black high school internalized a type of social deficit theory about themselves, which they explained through race, geographic, and to a lesser extent, class identity—revealing a clear social text that marked them as less in virtually every aspect of their schooling experience.

The study highlights the negative consequences of the Supreme Court's color blind ideology, as realized in the assignment of students to neighborhood schools. Despite promises of equity by school leaders resegregation has a profoundly negative effect on students, the vast majority of those involved clearly believing they were second class citizens within a caste system. Resegregated students especially noted newly created barriers to academic, social, and other curricular experiences important for their post-secondary aspirations.

The meaning of racial separation was especially significant due to hidden messages associated with diversity on the emotional, psychological, and intellectual development of adolescents. It was concluded that given the racialized meaning of inequitable educational

opportunities produced by resegregation, there is an urgent need to reconsider the color blind ideology undergirding the received reading of the Fourteenth Amendment to adopt more color conscious policies sensitive to the damaging effects Black students now experience through policies that unintentionally or intentionally produce racially isolated schools.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AHSAA	Alabama High School Athletic Association
ACT	Achievement College Test
AP	Advanced Placement courses
AYP	Annual Yearly Progress
<i>De facto</i>	Referring to racial segregation that is not law sanctioned
<i>De jure</i>	Referring to law-sanctioned racial segregation
East	Refers to the eastern high school, which was approximately 65% Black
GPA	Grade Point Average
HS	High school
IB	International Baccalaureate Diploma Program
IRB	International Review Board
MS	Middle school
NCLB	No Child Left Behind Law of 2001
North	Refers to the northern high school, which was almost 50% White
Pre-IB	Preparatory courses requisite for the International Diploma Program
SACS	Southeastern Accreditation of Colleges and Schools
SAT	Scholastic Achievement Test for college entrance
SGA	Student Government Association
TITLE I	Federal funding program to provide resources for low income schools
WEN	The city system's High School Television Station logo (pseudonym)

West Refers to the western high school, which was 100% African America

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Though educated in a parochial school in my almost entirely White town during the Civil Rights Era, I was aware of busing in the proximal urban school district where my parents were educators. My father taught high school English in what had been one of the top high schools in the city system, though this changed after a desegregation order was implemented and the school experienced a mass exodus of its middle and upper middle class White students. Over time, I was confounded to hear him lament that most of his bussed in students had great difficulty with reading and writing, and were unable to do high school level coursework--even in the general education track. I wondered what these students' schooling experiences had been, as it seemed inconceivable that so many could not be prepared to do high school work. Only years later, after reading James Anderson's (1988) *History of Black Education in the South, 1860-1935* in a Masters' level education course did I understand how historical educational practices of racism, discrimination, and inequality continued to impact educational opportunities for children of color. At the time, I was far removed from the social context of education in the United States teaching elementary grades in Paraguay. Paraguay had only recently emerged from a military dictatorship, and teaching there for sixteen years in elite dual language schools exposed me to similar inequities regarding educational opportunities in developing countries. I observed first-hand how such inequities were closely tied to hierarchical power structures of classism and racist views of indigenous groups within their post-colonial contexts.

I returned to the States for further study with the goal of preparing myself to help undo inequities present in policies for educational systems. Shortly after my arrival, I became aware of a local school system's restructuring plan that would resegregate a significant portion of its students. Two years earlier, the system had been released from court supervision after implementing a desegregation order for twenty-nine years. This proposed restructuring merely illustrated a national trend across the United States where educational leaders enacted policies that had the unintended effect of resegregating students by race (and class) as desegregation orders were lifted. Such action, which was not allowed under a desegregation order but was permissible after the grant of unitary status, came with the assumption that newer segregated schooling contexts no longer had the far reaching negative effects on children of color as they once had under Jim Crow (Bell, 2004; Ogletree, 2004). Not everyone in the local community was so convinced, as illustrated by a barrage of debates in school board meetings reported in the local newspaper that often spilled out into conversations in school faculty lounges, college of education classrooms, church parking lots, and just about anywhere across the community. Part of this concern occurred early on with debates about whether the school system should even apply for the grant of unitary status. African American families for the most part considered the ramifications such local power would yield, given the predominately White school board, and were reluctant to believe that a removal of court supervision would ultimately serve in the best interests for the students of color.

By the time I entered to do fieldwork interviewing teachers for a larger project during the fall of 2003, the newly restructured high schools were in their first year of functioning. At this point, I had read extensively about desegregation and research on the trends of resegregation, much of which documented detrimental effects it had on achievement measures for students of

color. Walking into the all Black high school to interview teachers was a stark reminder of what former segregated schools must have been like. The racial division of the students by building was noticeable, and something that evoked pain every time I entered the new schools. A frequent question posed to me by teachers who lived this new context was how such overt racial separation of students could be legally allowed. Many seemed desperate to find a way to undo the damaging effects they now witnessed through the racial text that was exaggerated with the restructuring. The answer to their disturbing question lies in the legal basis of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) and requires a look at the Supreme Court's interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment regarding the place of race in public education.

#### The Fourteenth Amendment and *Brown*

In his opinion to the court in the *Brown* decision, Chief Justice Earl Warren inserted references into his footnotes on the social science research presented by Kenneth Clark and others from the 1951 Topeka, Kansas, case, citing findings from these studies as reason to remove the distinction of race used in public education. Highlighting that law-sanctioned segregated schooling damaged the psychological well-being of Black children, he stated that the court's decision was unanimous as he read the decision, "We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' had no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal" (in Kluger, 1977, p. 707). Black students attending segregated schools in their local districts, he argued, had been denied equal protection of the law, as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment.

This was the focus of the *Brown* ruling, though a denial of equal protection guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment had actually been the same claim made by the plaintiff in the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case that had legally established separate but equal facilities. Although five

desegregation cases were argued in the *Brown* ruling, one of the five cases, the *Bolling v. Sharpe* (1954) case from the District of Columbia, differed slightly in its legal approach. James Nabrit, the prosecuting attorney, had posed that segregated schools in the nation's capital prevented Black children from being protected of life, liberty, or property without due process of law, as was stipulated in the Fifth Amendment (Kluger, 1977). Justice Warren did not argue this point, but rather, stated that in response to the other four desegregation cases the law of equal protection guaranteed under the Fourteenth Amendment for schools in the states applied equally to schools in the nation's capital, thus covering this case as well. While the stance of separate but equal espoused by *Plessy* had been applied to public education up to the *Brown* decision, the court requested the prosecutors to argue that separate was inherently unequal. The *Brown* decision set an important precedent by striking down the use of race in educational settings, citing this as a denial of equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment (Kluger, 1977). In this sense, treating equals unequally, as was the case for children of color through *de jure* segregated public schools, was ruled as an injustice.

Although the wording Justice Warren used to craft his opinion has been critiqued, interest in and debates about the idea of a color blind Constitution and its application to public education continue today. In the Warren opinion, however, he never cited the dissent opinion offered by Justice John Marshall Harlan in *Plessy*, "Our Constitution is color-blind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among the peoples" (in Patterson, 2001, p. 68). This omission continues to leave open the possibility for the court to make decisions concerning race, as Warren never claimed "that all statutory considerations of color . . . were impermissible" (Patterson, p. 68).

The Warren opinion, regardless of its conflicting ideas surrounding the validity of social science research, still has considerable gains that we can appreciate and apply to today's school

contexts of racially resegregated schools. First, as Patterson (2001) elucidated, this interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment provided a constitutional position that had the promising effect of revitalizing the meaning of equal protection. This was something that would serve to change race relations across the nation, especially in the South. Second, it forged a way to make much needed changes in political institutions such as Congress and state legislatures that these same institutions were incapable of achieving yet greatly desired to see happen. Finally, and germane to the present study, it seemed that the Warren court was open to interpreting the Constitution “in light of changing circumstances, not as a fixed document whose meaning had always to be found in the intent of the Founding Fathers or of politicians in the 1860s” (Patterson, 2001, p. 69). The changed condition Warren highlighted was the increasing need for a good education in order for one to have real (and not just formal) access to opportunity:

Today it is a principle instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to him on equal terms. (in Kluger, 1977, p. 704)

Justice Warren argued the need to strike out the use of race in assigning children to schools because of its negative impact on educational opportunity for children of color, underlining the significance education held for all members of society. He maintained that the role education played in allowing individuals freedom and opportunities in society was so critical that a denial of educational opportunity through *de jure* segregation was grossly unfair and unjust. The court’s interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment since that time, however, has reverted to a

focus on determining the original intent of the framers of the Constitution (often arguing that it is color blind), yet ethical consideration of the effects of color blind policies for public education in today's society, cannot and should not be easily dismissed.

#### *Intent of the Fourteenth Amendment*

More significant to the issue of the court's color blind stance today, Chief Justice Earl Warren's opinion to the court in the *Brown* decision included a brief reference to the intent of the Fourteenth Amendment. He argued that "the 'reach and intention' of the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment were unclear and that historical research to clarify the matter had been 'inconclusive'" (in Patterson, 2001, p. 66). He further commented that the almost nonexistence of public education for Blacks in the South at the time the Fourteenth Amendment was adopted in 1866 and ratified in 1868 most certainly led to a lack of clarity as to its intended effect regarding public education (Patterson, 2001). Indeed, as Anderson explained (in Tozer, Violas, & Senese, 2009), public education was not even a provision included in any of the state constitutions of the ten confederate states until Black suffrage, when Blacks were the majority vote in five of those states and belonged to the majority party in the other five. In other words, public education was non-existent or a very new institution in the South when issues of equal rights and citizenship were being debated in the Reconstruction Congress.

Previous to *Brown*, the court had been able to adopt racist interpretations of the Fourteenth Amendment, as illustrated in the *Plessy* decision and its application in six cases of public school litigation (Kluger, 1977; Patterson, 2001). Some critics, however, believe the framers of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments had clear goals as to the role of the federal government to protect newly freed Blacks from shifts in political power that might eventually restrict the full rights of Blacks. Not every legislator was in agreement with this extra

measure of precaution. The abolition of slavery under the Thirteenth Amendment, congressmen debated, should have clarified the fact that there would no longer be a set of rules for Whites and a different one for Blacks. Nevertheless, a small group of radical Republicans, including as Representative Thaddeus Stevens, still believed it crucial to make the new relationship between the federal and state governments explicit so that interpretations of the Thirteenth Amendment would not later become more restrictive through the power congressional majorities might use to seek ways to overturn it, thus his support to enact the Freedman's Bureau and Civil Rights bills (Patterson, 2001).

Why this type of redundancy in the law, and that at the federal level? Primarily, it responded to the political need circumscribed by social practices of the times, which were undergirded by competing ideologies surrounding the social construct of race. The first section of the Fourteenth Amendment, as originally crafted, declared:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws. (in Kluger, 1977, p. 47)

As Kluger pointed out, the fifth section of the Fourteenth Amendment gave Congress the same power to enforce these rights that was already provided under the second section of the Thirteenth Amendment, specifically, through "appropriate legislation" (in Kluger, p. 47).

Crucial to the addition of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was the precise nature



of the language used in its formulation—it removed any question of the rights it guaranteed “beyond all constitutional doubt” (p. 47).

What has continued over the years, especially in debates regarding the place of race in public school policy today, is what “appropriate” legislation means (Kluger, 1977). One such measure of legislation fought for by Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts and Representative Thaddeus Stevens of Pennsylvania was the 1875 Civil Rights Act, which was designed to supplement the Civil Rights Act of 1866. This was to provide a federal law binding the states to equal rights regardless of race or color that would guarantee everyone could enjoy public accommodations, including those listed by Sumner in his proposed wording for the Civil Rights Act in 1870, “public conveyances, hotels, licensed theaters, houses of public entertainment, common schools and institutions of learning authorized by law” (in Anderson, 2007, p. 256). The Act additionally stated that no one could “be disqualified from jury duty because of race or previous status of servitude”—something that specifically spoke to the problems of transition out of the racialized structure of dominance imposed during the enslavement of Blacks (Kluger, p. 50). Congress ultimately struck out the public education provision of Sumner’s proposed bill, and although it was passed, it was eventually ruled unconstitutional by the court in 1883 (Anderson, 2007). The Supreme Court ruled that public accommodations, including hotels and restaurants that were privately owned, could racially discriminate because the equal protection clause did not outlaw this practice (Irons & Guitton, 1993).

Historians and legal scholars have scrutinized earlier documents from the Reconstruction Congress to determine whether the constitution is color blind based upon the framers’ intent of the equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment (Anderson, 2007; Kull, 1992; Moreno,

1995). Andrew Kull, a prominent legal scholar, found from records that although Congress could have created a color blind constitution in 1866, legislators rejected many proposals that would have done this, thus calling into question the idea that the original intent of the framers was a color blind Constitution (1992). Anderson (2007) examined the original positions of the Reconstruction Congress from 1865-1875 to elucidate whether they did in fact establish a new position of color blindness in the Constitution. This is important, he argued, as a color blind constitution would prohibit the use of race by the government to achieve desegregation in our schools. Anderson found he had to use a multiethnic lens of history to gain a precise understanding of the meaning of Amendments and bills where issues of race were intertwined with equality and citizenship because language was carefully edited or left out to signify meaning. For example, numerous debates on the wording of clauses on how to define citizenship showed the overt intent to exclude Native Americans. This highlighted the framers' dilemma in finding the exact wording that would make phrasing the most expansive way to allow as few Native Americans as possible to become citizens. In debates on the Naturalization Act of 1870, not only were Native Americans a problem, the Chinese were seen as an ungodly and inferior race that posed a threat to the country. To prevent these two groups from becoming citizens, legislators ultimately kept the word "White" in the naturalization law, with an amendment to include naturalization of aliens of African descent. Blacks, then, were the first non-White race permitted to become citizens, but throughout this time they were the only ones (Anderson, 2007). Anderson argued that race was encoded in the law through wording that achieved color conscious ends, such as these specific exclusions in birthright and naturalization. There were a few radical Republicans who greatly opposed these measures, but despite

advocating for a liberal Constitution of equality for all persons, they were overridden by the beliefs of the times. Anderson concluded,

The moderate-conservative majority that framed the Reconstruction legislation was not a color-blind body bent on establishing neutral standards of citizenship and equality. On the contrary, they were very much a race-conscious generation, one that took race and color into account in all of their debates about citizenship and equal rights and ultimately encoded both benign and malignant racial classifications into Reconstruction legislation. (2007, p. 256)

In returning to the Fourteenth Amendment, what seems clear is that the language used was to change power between the federal and state governments, and that it promoted the federal government's ability to intervene to safeguard the Black man such that he would never be "shunted into some indeterminate limbo between slavery and full citizenship" (Kluger, 1977; p. 47). The *Brown* decision was such an intervention, as it argued that *de jure* segregation in public schools resulted in the creation of a second class or inferior social status for Black children. Under the ruling in *Brown*, race cannot be a factor in assigning students to schools, a decision some believe has moved the Constitution to being truly color blind, though others adamantly disagree (Anderson, 2007; Kluger; Kull, 1992; Moreno, 1995).

While the intention of the *Brown* ruling was to undo the harmful effects of a dual education system by no longer allowing law sanctioned racial segregation, this position has brought up special issue as to the use of race to purposely integrate students. Special exceptions to *Brown*, for example, have included the court allowing race conscious admissions policies to foment diversity on college campuses, such as the 2003 University of Michigan Law School case, where diversity at the graduate school level is seen as a compelling state interest (*Grutter v.*

*Bollinger*, 2003). Nevertheless, the court has been very strict with certain entrance policies, for example not allowing quotas of students, as ruled in the *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* case (1978) and the more recent 2003 Michigan University case concerning its undergraduate admissions policy (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003). The court's position in the *Bakke* decision, which has continued to this day, is that quotas remove individual competition because those students not fulfilling the requisite race are not even eligible for consideration in the places that are reserved. The court maintains that the Constitution still allows certain types of race-conscious policies for college admissions programs precisely because of the need to redress the effects of "the legacy of unequal treatment" as Justice Thurgood Marshall wrote (in Irons & Guitton, p. 305) and because diversity is still considered to enhance the academic preparation of all students.

Court cases involving race-based policies in student assignment for public education have maintained that race may not be used, even to better diversify student enrollment, but this is premised on a color blind interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the recent Louisville and Seattle 2007 integration cases, the justices overwhelmingly referred to the Constitution as color blind, maintaining that it prohibited race-based decision-making in public schools (Anderson, 2007). Anderson disagreed, arguing that historically, the Constitution has been quite sensitive to the use of race. He demonstrated that repeatedly, race and color were a part of every debate of the Reconstruction legislation, especially given that they excluded the phrase "no racial distinction" from the Fourteenth Amendment (p. 256). As Anderson concluded, the framers of the Fourteenth Amendment left unresolved the issue of a color blind Constitution in that in general "it neither denied nor compelled racial distinctions by government" (p. 256). The action of assigning students to schools based upon race, even for the purposes of integration, is viewed

as undermining the Fourteenth Amendment by the court, but is this a fair interpretation for public education that allows students to be resegregated under the guise of neighborhood schools after the grant of unitary status? What if neighborhoods and housing patterns serve as a proxy for race that further support creating resegregated neighborhood schools?

The Louisville and Seattle desegregation cases are of significance to the present study because of the pattern of interpretation from the justices' opinions surrounding equal protection on the Fourteenth Amendment. Justice Roberts wrote, "Simply because the school districts may seek a worthy goal does not mean they are free to discriminate on the basis of race," (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, 551 U.S., 2007). Roberts maintained the need for a strict line in preserving the individual's rights to educational benefits over the social gains that an assignment policy may promote. Significant to the Seattle case is that the child represented was a special needs student who had been accepted into a program better tailored to meet his learning needs, but was then denied entrance because of his race. Barret and Katsiyannis (2008) pointed out that in this case, the Court's opinion seeks substantive educational benefits over race-based assignments that are more arbitrary in nature. This arbitrariness the court opposed was precisely because there were no specific ways that the race-based assignments were tied to how these served to enhance educational opportunity. Still, Justice Breyer disagreed with such a general position, arguing that segregationist policies were not just about building assignment, but more importantly, reflected deeply rooted caste systems of enslavement through legalized subordination that children of color experienced in schools. School assignment plans were not just an arbitrary way to attain a social goal of integration, but actually were gatekeepers to providing access to educational opportunity for students of color in complex and profound ways. The great dilemma of the return to resegregated schools is more

attune to Breyer's position in that the social text this creates for children of color transcends a simplistic view of just maintaining social ends of integration. Many Black scholars, including Derrick Bell (2004) and Charles Ogletree (2004) support this stance, as it compromises the true meaning of constitutional equality by allowing institutionalized segregation.

### Unitary Status and Resegregation Today

In order to end federally mandated desegregation, school districts must apply for the Order of Unitary Status. Upon receiving the Dismissal of Desegregation Orders, school districts are legally allowed to resegregate students through restructuring plans that establish neighborhood schools where attendance patterns follow *de facto* segregated housing patterns. Such schools in today's educational setting often parallel the apartheid schooling context under the *Plessy* era through racial marginalization. Orfield and Eaton (1996) maintain that this allowance is diametrically opposed to the spirit of the law originally intentioned by *Brown*. The *Brown* ruling had two purposes: it sought not only to end the detrimental effects of educational inequity from law sanctioned segregation, but also had the goal of ensuring that a dual system of education was never reestablished (Orfield & Eaton). So one question of interest would be to define what constitutes a dual system of education. This protection espoused by *Brown* is not really examined, even though education leaders seem to address it when they provide reasons for undoing desegregation plans.

Orfield and Eaton's (1996) research on the justifications school district leaders use to create racially segregated neighborhood schools matched the types of arguments made regarding school location, zoning, and building assignment of students under the local system's restructuring plan. Ultimately, this plan resegregated a substantial number of high school minority students who already were racially and socio-economically marginalized within the

community. Orfield and Eaton also documented a host of devastating effects on achievement for children of color after school systems dismantled their desegregation plans, something that disturbed me. However, I also wondered what other effects the local resegregation would have on students over time.

I recalled my father's high school, which, due to White flight, eventually became all Black in response to the implementation of a desegregation order. Once known as one of the city's best where its graduates attended the most prestigious universities in the nation (Grant, 1988), the school eventually served low income minority students exclusively and soon focused instruction on students passing minimum competency exams initiated by the state. In retrospect, this sensitized me to the impact a school's demographic pattern can have on access to an academically rigorous curriculum. In considering the local system's restructuring, I believed that unless special measures were taken to ensure access to a college track curriculum at the racially identifiable school, the increased race and class-based resegregation would most likely have a negative impact on the curriculum available for these students.

My greater concern and research interest, however, was what partially resegregating the system's high school students would mean for those students so blatantly marginalized by race. I could not find documentation of this in the research, yet wondered if the change to neighborhood schools would be viewed by students as natural and equal because most students would attend the school closest to their home. I wondered what ties the students would make between this aspect of the schools' social context and their educational experiences, including their sense of possibility for choices regarding post-secondary education and employment. If these options are crucial to the quality of participation in mainstream society for traditionally marginalized groups growing up in segregated settings, what meaning would a resegregated educational setting have

for them? I wondered if their understanding of this context would be shaded by a sense of racial subordination through the division. I thought that the division would generate negative assumptions by stakeholders across the community about minority students coming from its socio-economically and racially marginalized neighborhoods. And I believed the students, especially those attending the racially identifiable high school, would be aware of these assumptions.

While many African Americans, including Thurgood Marshall, questioned the wisdom of integrated school settings that frequently exposed African American children to the harms of racism, I thought that this partial segregation of the former integrated high school would write a text of racial superiority and inferiority along a color line (Patterson, 2001). Such white supremacist messages would be damaging enough, as they served to reinvigorate a backdrop of historical racism present in the region. But these would have serious consequences for those most vulnerable to its devastating effects if they re-inscribed the status of less to students attending the all Black school. This exception to the rule—an all Black school created alongside two integrated schools—had the potential to teach all the students that a particular construct of Blackness compromised their worthiness as students and citizens. While I continue to share in Marshall’s concerns about racist practices in schools (many of which have become institutionalized and hidden), I believe, like Marshall, that ultimately it is necessary to move towards a society that is no longer racially divided, especially in institutions of public education (Patterson, 2001).

#### My Contribution (The Proposed Study)

Although a greater focus on researching the long-term effects of school desegregation might help undermine the current national trend of resegregation, I believe an angle heretofore



underexamined exists that researchers can take in defense of maintaining desegregated public schools. The increase of school leaders and local community groups advocating for neighborhood or community schools that return students of color to inferior segregated schools is dangerous because it carries with it the tacit belief that segregated schools are equally unequal with desegregated schools; many scholars would argue that neither structure has significantly improved the educational outcomes for children of color (Bell, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, Mickelson, 1999, 2001, 2005).

The argument against a return to resegregated neighborhood schools, however, should not just consider outcomes, such as standardized test scores, graduation rates, enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP) classes, dropout rates, or college attendance and completion, all of which are important (Boger & Orfield, 2005; Fine, 1991; Orfield & Yun, 1999; Patterson, 2001; Wells, 1995). It must also include the meaning school resegregation has for students experiencing this structure under *Brown*. This is especially true for students marginalized in the broader social context of a community who become further marginalized by education policies that inadvertently or unintentionally resegregate students to inferior schools. Such a process is critical at the secondary school level because access to academically rigorous curriculum, extracurricular activities, and exposure to the social and cultural capital of mainstream society through the hidden curriculum of diversity are all crucial to preparation for attending institutions of post-secondary education (Anyon, 1987; Meier, 1995; Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

Such a focus is important for several reasons. First, the processes in the present study produced commentary across the community about the students attending the all Black school. Impressions produced surrounding a resegregated school context and that are accepted and come to function as true for students have important consequences for how they view themselves and

their sense of possibility. Students' understandings of themselves and their experiences come from their relations with others like and unlike them in the world, in their immediate community, in their schools, and through personal reflection. It is important to trace these understandings to identify how they color students' sense of possibility in preparation for incorporation into society in terms of their aspirations for higher education and plans for employment. Students attending the all Black school were to some extent already marked by their neighborhoods as bad or violent, less able to learn, deficit in intellectual or social skills, lacking in academic aspirations—in short, as less than peers attending the integrated schools. Even in its newness, students attending the all Black high school had already been living and reading the social text of segregation as a result of the racially divided middle schools. The process of separating a significant portion of Black students to their own neighborhood high school opened an onslaught of deficit explanations already prevalent across the community, and these became more frequently exposed in commentary that accompanied the restructuring over time. It was against these types of ideas that students attending the all Black school continually found themselves having to struggle, expending quite a bit of emotional and psychological energy to undo them aside from attending to their schooling. Even if it would not be possible to trace direct effects of such efforts to actual student academic performance, the burden these students carried was one that led them to read into the social text of the restructuring the ascription of racial inferiority in virtually every aspect of their schooling.

This study documents what the restructuring meant for the students experiencing increased class and race-based segregation at the high school level. I have chosen to examine this aspect of the restructuring because if we do not understand how the interpretation of *Brown* is being conditioned by a wider cultural context of white supremacy, we will miss how the

representation of institutional class and racial segregation in schools influences the understandings of worthiness as these become based upon racial distinction for high school students experiencing this phenomenon. It is important to care about the impact of resegregation on how students understand educational contexts, as I will argue throughout the study, because the material and symbolic aspects of a resegregated high school structure had profoundly damaging effects for the students attending it that must be considered as much an outcome as a test score.

The contribution I plan to make to the field of education as a result of my research focus is two-fold. First, I wish to expand the dialog taking place in institutions of higher learning regarding issues of educational equity related to racial justice. Specifically, we as educators in teacher educator and educational leadership programs need to be well-versed in the vast array of potentially negative consequences of school restructuring plans that increase the racial segregation of students. The complex issues that surfaced in the present case are ones that never appear in models of data-driven decision making that school leaders are mandated to follow to improve standardized test scores. Admittedly, the use of color blind techniques to craft zoning policies, likewise, can result in unintended yet harmful effects on students, though in the present case it would be difficult to argue that student addresses were not being used by leaders as a proxy for race and class. In returning to the more salient point and broader scope of preparing ethical decision makers in the field of education, greater recognition of the unintended harmful effects generated by resegregating students requires that we be skilled to provide a critical analysis of the policies we propose prior to their enactment.

Second, this research will speak to a national audience regarding the harmful effects of a color blind ideology in crafting neighborhood schools today. This is important because school

districts increasingly have copied restructuring plans that create resegregated schools after the grant of unitary status (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Somehow creating school contexts similar to those allowed by *Plessy* has become acceptable and uncontested in school districts and systems across the nation. The Civil Rights Project<sup>1</sup> headed by director Dr. Gary Orfield provides legal, demographic, and other statistical analyses to monitor and report such trends. This study will add detail to the consequences of the general patterns documented by such work as the Civil Rights Project. Though this research will doubtless speak to stakeholders in the local community and challenge the current direction that board policy has taken with regard to the social context it has created for its local high schools (as well as the middle and elementary schools), the goal still remains to advocate for genuine change across our nation to undo the inferior status children of color continue to sense in our society's public schools because of legal support of this structure. These adolescents' lives continue to be affected in harmful ways during the time when they are most vulnerable to damaging messages society sends about their value as human beings; I can do no less than advocate for all of the children such practices are adversely affecting by uncovering the effects of the hidden curriculum of diversity in current resegregated school structures.

To elucidate the complex ways the creation of a resegregated school district is interpreted by adolescents I have done a traditional dissertation. Following the interpretive tradition of ethnography within the social sciences, this project focuses on the meanings present in the community, school, and individual responses that formed the backdrop of this context (Spindler & Spindler, 1987a, 1987b, 2000).

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<sup>1</sup> With Dr. Gary Orfield's transfer to the UCLA in California, the name "Harvard Civil Rights Project" is now under the title "Civil Rights Project."

My primary data source was focus group and individual interviews with high school students. At the most basic level, students from the system's three high schools were interviewed in focus groups to provide a way to compare their educational experiences and the ways in which each group assessed the other schools through this understanding. Several individual interviews were done opportunistically to allow students to talk in greater detail about their experiences with the restructuring. After transcription, I identified the wording present in student explanations and responses to the interview questions through coding all of the interviews. From this set of codes I created a diagram of how the various major concerns expressed by students were related. This understanding led me to important gaps in the specific interpretations of the students, and required that I conduct a second round of more detailed coding to collapse, delete, and add new codes. This process allowed me to categorize more specifically the phrasing students provided in their responses as they explained the meaning of the newer school context. From the second coding, I organized the main areas of data with their respective subareas to select and focus on features of the restructuring about which students showed most concern. The data areas, once identified, allowed me to compare student experiences across the three schools. At another level, the student responses were compared with two other sources of data. The first set of secondary data was two years of board and school documents that were public record. Much of these data included such things as School Improvement Plans, records of test scores placed in the public narrative, issues presented by families or teachers before the school board, and awards given to the schools. This data source provided a way to examine the types of outcomes brought to the attention of the public and that often were presented to the students by way of the weekly television program of high school newsworthy events. It provided background information on the types of extracurricular activities

available to the schools, which, due to the restructuring's design and processes, were often quite disparate in human and material resources. At some level these contributed to fostering images of the schools as successful (or not) because of the outcomes they generated. Finally, it identified some of the ideas present in the community that served to support certain images of the schools, thus supporting the fact that the meaning students made was not just their imagination or exaggerations of sentiments and reactions to the restructuring by community members.

The other secondary data source included the documentation of discussions and debates surrounding the restructuring, the new schools, and of institutional practices of the school system. Much of this came in the form of analysis of a variety of written documents, including summaries from the original 1970 desegregation plan and the later mandated desegregation order of 1978 of the system, two years of school board public documents, observations from school and board meetings and activities, and collection of approximately ten years of local newspaper coverage (most of which is in electronic files) of the entire restructuring process. The news reportage spans from the 1997 debates surrounding the system's application for the grant of unitary status through the third wave of resegregation that ended with rezoning at the elementary school level in May 2007. The archival data were used to match events, including public statements related to them that were present in students' commentary. At times, for example, students referred to specific articles by title, presentation, phrasing, or facts published in the local newspaper to argue the points they were making. This helps to support the argument that students were not living the reality of the resegregation in isolation. There was frequent talk about it, and they were often aware of issues and public statements and internalized these perspectives surrounding the restructuring. The archival data are important, then, as it serves as

a public record of events and a source for what information, with its embedded assumptions and perspectives, was placed into the public narrative.

### *Research Questions*

Using the discussion of the problem outlined above, the study examines the following research questions:

The first question is, how are high school students interpreting the establishment of a partially resegregated school system brought about by mandatory school district restructuring? This question includes how students understand (1) community members' views, including ideas presented by peers and the local media, (2) the curricular options available to them, (3) extracurricular options tied to community funding, and (4) the sense of possibility students had for their future education, employment, and participation in mainstream society.

An important part of the meaning the resegregation had for students included their understanding of what they believed peers in the other schools were receiving or had access to and how this framed their own sense of possibility. Through the partial resegregation of the system's high schools, students experienced differentiated structural arrangements that were highly intertwined with race, class, and stakeholders' assumptions of their abilities or interest in education. This question allows me to examine how these differences were interpreted by students as they made meaning of the various contexts created by the restructuring.

Because student responses uncovered many labels by peers and community members, including stereotypes about a racially identifiable school, a second question must be addressed: What social and cultural labels are framing student interpretations of the restructuring? This includes one sub question: how are students' interpretations of the restructuring related to them as students and citizens?

As mentioned, the schools from their inception differed because of the demographic division and other structural features. Over time, the composites of the schools led to differing outcomes and types of opportunities offered at the schools. This question will help me to synthesize the students' understandings from the first question into a composite of how they saw themselves become constructed as students and citizens based upon the types of evidence (material and symbolic) they drew on to assess the new arrangement. For the students who were resegregated, this was highly complex, as they attempted to understand why they were treated so distinctly from their peers. Their observations of the social dynamics of the educational experiences led them to respond to the restructuring by concluding what this differential treatment meant for them as students in the same school system and citizens within the same community.

### *Summary of the Study*

Given the national trend towards increased school resegregation, this issue is important to examine because research demonstrates that the problems resegregated neighborhood schools purport to solve are not solved and are often exacerbated (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). The court's interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment promotes a color blind ideology that allows the creation of resegregated neighborhood schools to be innocent. This raises the question, what is happening to students of color in schools where restructuring leads to greater class and race segregation? The present study looked at one facet of this dynamic—the way some of the students interpreted the significance of the changes in their high school structure.

The purpose of this study, then, is to interpret the meaning resegregation has for students who experienced these complex social forces at work throughout the process of one school system's high school restructuring. It will not attempt to prove whether their beliefs were true or



false, for even false beliefs have real consequences. Rather, it sets out to document the meaning of unitary status inspired restructuring for high school students because this is a damaging outcome of resegregated school contexts allowed as a result of a legal system undergirded by a post-race ethos that now renders the spirit of the law under *Brown v. Board of Education* of no effect. A return to racially separated neighborhood schools through the legal stipulations allowed after the grant of unitary status is seen as a benign activity by the court—one that fits a color blind position and is justified as long as leaders in these school systems promise to act for the educational good of all of the children it serves. Such a position, the present research will argue, makes it impossible to protect children of color from the unintended but harmful effects of institutionalized racism that continue to pervade our public school structures.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

At the broadest level, any study looking at the desegregation and resegregation of public educational systems today needs to consider the historical context of institutionalized racism and class inequality from which contemporary educational institutions have emerged. This history of inequality continues into the present and has continued to have consequences for the educational experiences of students. Likewise, it has consequences for parents, teachers, and other educational stakeholders.

A great deal has been written about the influence of race and class on the dynamics of schooling over the last century. It would be beyond the scope of this literature review, and indeed beyond the scope of any single text, to comprehensively review this literature. For the purposes of this study, therefore, I will focus on the more immediate history of desegregation and resegregation to elucidate some of the effects the court's color blind position regarding the Fourteenth Amendment has had on public education. Additionally, a discussion on cultural ethnography is necessary to demonstrate its usefulness in documenting the meaning for students experiencing varying degrees of resegregation created by the unitary status inspired restructuring. To accomplish these goals the chapter is divided into two major sections. The first section provides a literature review on legal precedent in desegregation cases over time and a brief overview of the extant research on educational outcomes of both desegregation and segregated contexts. Salient points from this literature are then incorporated into background information on the local school context to highlight debates surrounding the proposed

restructuring prior to and during the early part of its implementation. The second section of the chapter returns to the project's goal: the need to document student meaning of the resegregation as an outcome of the restructuring. This includes a discussion on the distinction between critical and cultural ethnography within the field of educational ethnography to argue that cultural ethnography is an adequate means for documenting meaning the socio-cultural context of school resegregation has for high school students.

### Legal Background

In recent years, the philosophical position of the federal courts regarding the grant of unitary status has shifted away from the original intentions of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (347 U.S. 483) decision, making it easier for school districts to have desegregation orders lifted. Three court decisions in the nineties emphasized the court's priority of returning local control to school districts (*Board of Education of Oklahoma v. Dowell*, 1991; *Bouchard*, 1996; *Freeman v. Pitts*, 1992; *Missouri v. Jenkins*, 1995; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Using the criteria<sup>2</sup> stipulated by *Green* (in *Green v. New Kent County*, 1968), if school districts demonstrate that they have in good faith removed the vestiges segregation that occurred under state sanctioned segregated school policies, then court oversight will be removed. Orfield & Eaton pointed out that the original use of the *Green* factors was to identify the presence of a dual system operating in public schools—one White and well-supported, the other Black and inferior. A school system would subsequently be posited as “unitary” only if it had achieved racial integration as a long-term permanent goal. At that time, it was impermissible for any district to ignore or work against that goal. Under the court's later interpretation of unitary status, which

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<sup>2</sup> See *Green v. County School Board*, 391 U.S. 430 (1968) for the guide used by courts to determine whether a school system is unitary. Also known as the Green Standards, these include the student body, faculty and staff assignment, transportation, extracurricular activities, and facilities.

evolved through the three major court cases in the 1990s, school districts may knowingly create racially segregated schools once they are declared unitary. This allowance has resulted in a national pattern of increased *de facto* segregation of students through school restructuring plans as school systems that are released from desegregation orders create neighborhood schools (Bell, 2004; Clotfelter, 2004; Irons, 2002; Orfield, 2001; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Orfield & Yun, 1999). To provide a picture of this trend at the national level, the Harvard Civil Rights Project reported that in 1999 the number of Black students attending predominately Black schools ranged from 74 to 78 percent (Orfield, 2001). Statistical evidence demonstrates that segregation in areas outside of the South has been more pronounced. Orfield and Yun (1999) found that the move from two percent of Black children attending predominately White schools in the South in 1964 to a peak of forty-four percent in 1988 provides an idea of the extent to which desegregation orders impacted the social context of schooling for Southern children during those years. To provide a clearer picture of the effects of dismantling school desegregation plans in the South, in 1998 fewer than thirty-three percent of Black children attended predominately White schools in the South—a statistic lower than that of 1970, meaning that two thirds of Black children in the South now attend predominately Black schools. This trend is significant, as minority schools also have high concentrations of poverty, which greatly impacts the quality of education to which these children have access (Orfield & Yun, 1999).

Orfield and Eaton (1996) argued that justifications policy makers use to justify restructuring plans that resegregate students are foundationally weak. One of the most common rationales for ending desegregation plans and replacing them with resegregated neighborhood schools after the grant of unitary status is to stop White flight and attract White families back. Orfield and Eaton traced the outcomes of numerous school systems that have done this since the

mid 1980s to demonstrate that undoing desegregation plans does not end White flight, and usually increases it. Their research indicated that typically White flight is accompanied by an even higher rate of Black flight from schools, suggesting that when flight takes place, it is Black and White and usually middle class. Unfortunately, school districts are allowed by courts to create segregated neighborhood schools when they justify this action as a way to attract Whites back into the system to better integrate the schools. Their justification rests on the premise that such action will eventually improve education for the segregated children—a premise that leads judges to favor resegregation. Orfield and Eaton also documented that at times, highly suspicious demographic projections (using speculative numbers to argue that more Whites will leave if desegregated contexts are not changed or that Whites will be attracted back if neighborhood schools replace busing) are used to advocate for neighborhood schools that are racially segregated. In the cases they cited, the numbers turned out to be grossly exaggerated, and sadly, the neighborhood school arrangements actually worsened district-wide racial balances over time (Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

The goal of integration is not the only one undermined in restructuring processes that undo desegregated contexts. Research conducted by the Civil Rights Project (formerly the Harvard Civil Rights Project) on long term national achievement outcomes indicated that trends of closing achievement gaps during the time of court mandated desegregation orders of the '70s and '80s widened during the '90s with the return to resegregated neighborhood schools (Orfield, 2001; Orfield and Yun, 1999; Patterson, 2001). Further evidence of a widening achievement gap is present in the region of the South specifically where some of the most innovative and successful desegregation plans in the nation once existed (Boger & Orfield, 2005; Clotfelter, 2004; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005).

## The Past: Effects of Segregation in Public Schools

Since the central argument of this study is to examine the place of race in public education, it is necessary to include an overview of the social science findings presented to the court as argument for overturning of the use of race to segregate schools as supported by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. The present research shares similitude with the arguments and observations presented by expert witnesses in court cases leading up to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) concerning the consequences of *de jure* and *de facto* segregation on the socio cultural features of schools. Notably, some segregation practices were not law sanctioned but were condoned by local school systems, and as experts pointed out, still had deleterious effects on children of color. It is important to revisit the debates surrounding those findings by expert witnesses for the court, as they provide a lens with which to judge some effects interpretations of a color blind Constitution have on public education today. The effects of a lack of legal protection for children of color under law sanctioned school segregation can be found in resegregation as practiced today in educational institutions as a result of a color blind approach to policies. As the dissertation will ultimately argue, at least some of these effects differ little from those produced by race conscious policies of Jim Crow. While the term “segregation” has been removed under the guise of constitutional equality through a color blind ideology, the presence of racial subordination has not disappeared (Bell, 2004). A significant contribution to those types of arguments was the seminal work of Kenneth and Mamie Clark, to which I now turn.

### *Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s Contributions*

Kenneth Clark, a social psychologist, was an assistant professor at City College of New York at the time he was called upon by Thurgood Marshal to serve as an expert witness in

several of the school segregation cases leading up to *Brown*. Perhaps what Kenneth and Mamie Clark are best known for is their work that employed the use of dolls to develop “a series of projective tests that disclosed how early in life Black children came to understand that success, security, beauty, and status all wear a White skin in America” (Kluger, 1977, p. 315). Their findings, in Kenneth Clark’s words, indicated “an unmistakable preference for the White doll and a rejection of the brown doll” for the majority of the children, even as early as three years old (in Kluger, p. 318). Much of the Clarks’ research examined the skin colors Black children chose through several means, one of which was coloring drawings of themselves or their preferences of skin color for a peer by selecting from various shades of brown. Clark also elicited children’s choices of dolls with dark and White skin to indicate characteristics of the dolls along a binary opposition of good and bad. As Clark himself noted, “What was surprising was the degree to which the children suffered from self-rejection, with its truncating effect on personalities, and the earliness of the corrosive awareness of color” (cited in Kluger, p. 318). In retrospect, Clark noted that no one at that point—not even Blacks, realized how extensive the damaging effects of racism were on children of color. In the 1950 White House monograph that Clark was commissioned to write about the problems of minority children, he cited the important work of Marian J. Radke and Helen G. Trager (1950) whose findings not only corroborated with the Clarks’ research findings, but extended them in significant ways.<sup>3</sup> Like the Clarks’ studies, Radke and Trager’s work demonstrated that racial prejudice fixed the social expectations of both White and Black children, and this, at a surprisingly early age. While it would be difficult to

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<sup>3</sup> See Radke and Trager’s 1950 study, “Children’s perceptions of the social roles of Negroes and Whites,” in the *Journal of Psychology*, where White and Black children even as young as five and six years old selected clothing and matched housing (a run-down tenement or single family dwelling with a spacious lawn and White picket fence) they believed appropriate for each type of cardboard doll.

isolate the effect of racial segregation in public schools without considering other forms of racial prejudice and discrimination present in the broader society, these studies showed that early school years had a profound “shaping effect” on American children regardless of their color (Kluger, p. 319). Kenneth Clark cautiously advised Thurgood Marshal’s team that his findings did not distinguish between the psychological damages Black children suffered specifically from the effects of segregated schools and those stemming from the collective impact of prejudice, discrimination, and racism prevalent in society. He did, however, vouch for the detrimental effect all of these had on Black children.

In the 1951 *Briggs v. Elliot* desegregation case, Clark’s conclusions were challenged by social philosophy professor Ernest van den Haag. Van den Haag questioned the extent to which racial segregation promoted self-rejection by stating that the findings seemed to indicate a healthier view in the Southern segregated children,<sup>4</sup> who selected White skin over brown far less than their peers in northern unsegregated settings for the doll and coloring tests. Clark responded that his argument for the court included his interactions with the children he tested, “what the findings show is that the Black children of the South were more adjusted to the feeling that they were not as good as the Whites and, because they felt defeated at an early age, did not bother using the device of denial” (cited in Kluger, 1977, p. 356) He explained, “The little Southern children would point to the Black doll and say, ‘Oh, yeah, that’s me there—that’s a nigger—I’m a nigger,’ and they said it almost cheerfully” (cited in Kluger, p. 356). This contrasted with the

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<sup>4</sup> In Richard Kluger’s *Simple Justice* (1977), van den Haag challenged Clark’s findings as contradictory or ambiguous and open to varying interpretations: 39% of unsegregated Black children in Springfield, MA picked the White doll as compared to only 29% of the Black children attending segregated schools in Arkansas. For the coloring activity, 80% of the Southern children preferred brown to the northern children’s 36%. This, he argued, indicated that the segregated setting was less damaging than desegregated settings for Black children (pp. 355-356).



great conflict apparent in the Northern children when asked the same question. The Northern children fought against this pathology, he argued, thus presenting a healthier response rather than adjusting to it. Clark defended his results by maintaining that acceptance of racial inferiority was clearly a sign of psychological unhealthiness for these Southern Black children—an effect of the more rampant racial prejudice they experienced in the South during that time.

Helen Trager, co-author of several extensive studies done with school children in Philadelphia on their awareness of racial differences, also testified in the *Briggs* case. Her conclusions showed that Black children expected to be rejected, unlike White children, and that this increased sharply between the ages of five and eight years old. Trager explained to the court, “A child who expects to be rejected, who sees his group held in low esteem, is not going to function well, he is not going to be a fully developed child” (Kluger, 1977, p. 362).

Frederic Wertham, a Bavarian-born psychiatrist who became a leading forensic psychiatrist for the court with his work of thorough psychiatric examination of convicted felons before sentencing, was called as a witness for the same 1951 Delaware case. He understood that the racism of America led to a “disproportionately high incidence of pathological behavior” in Blacks, and often testified in court on behalf of Black patients he saw at the Johns Hopkins out patient-clinic (Kluger, 1977, p. 441). His remarks to the court:

Now the fact of segregation in public and high school creates in the mind of the child an unsolvable conflict, an unsolvable emotional conflict and I would say an inevitable conflict . . . One way to overcome such a conflict is to have a realistic rationalization about it, but . . . I have found that the children cannot find such a realistic rationalization for the simple reason that the adults don't give it to them and for the reason that the state itself, the extent that I have searched for it, cannot give an understandable explanation.

So we place on these children a burden we don't take ourselves ordinarily, and they cannot solve it. (in Kluger, p. 444)

In Wertham's view, condoning public school segregation transcended the gross physical differences prevalent in the school facilities for Blacks and Whites of the time period. He provided the following analysis of the impact condoned social segregation had on the minds of the children:

It is the fact of segregation in general and the problems that come out of it that to my mind is anti-educational . . . education in the larger sense is interfered with . . . Most of the children we have examined interpret segregation in one way and one way only—and that is they interpret it as punishment. There is no doubt about that. (in Kluger, p. 444)

While he, like Clark and Trager, acknowledged that it was not just school segregation that caused this interpretation, Wertham gave four reasons for why school segregation was particularly damaging to Black children: “(1) It is absolutely clear cut; (2) the state does it; (3) it is discrimination of a very long duration; and (4) ‘it is bound up in the whole educational process, which I consider part of the mental health of the child’” (Kluger, 1977, p. 444). It was crucial to consider the degree of impact racial segregation had, as schooling is significant during two very important parts of the child's life: first, when a child moves out of the protective environment of the family and second, during adolescence when youth need to select a social group to which they adhere. The state's role in the damage was clear, as Wertham asserted that it “identifies itself with its most bigoted citizens” (cited in Kluger, p. 444) by perpetuating the social practice of school segregation. In his view, such practice would seriously affect the minds of children, as this could destroy their ethical development by an act of the state.

Wertham further indicated that his same analysis held for *de facto* segregated schools such as the

case of New York State, which did not practice *de jure* segregation but did have racially segregated schools by custom and prejudice.

### *Critiques of Clark's Findings and Implications*

Black and White scholars alike strongly criticized Kenneth Clark's work during the 1950s and 60s. Researchers found weaknesses in the methodology of the studies, such as the small numbers of children interviewed, lack of consistency by the use of pictures in place of dolls, and the overwhelming problem that such methods could not clearly distinguish between the effects of school segregation and those of the social segregation rampant in society from Jim Crow laws and social practices. Even Justice Warren's footnote eleven in his opinion to the court was just a gesture to the social science research, indicating that no one would ever believe the arguments of *Plessy* (Kluger, 1977). The more important critique, however, later came from Blacks themselves, who despite experiencing the harsh realities of racial discrimination did not seem to suffer from low self-esteem. It was this contradiction that led many Black intellectuals to spurn Clark's research, including Zora Neal Houston and Derrick Bell, who advocated pride in Black institutions and organizations, especially after the Civil Rights movement when law sanctioned separation of Blacks became dismantled and Black leaders aggressively advocated self-assertion. Any implications from studies today made in light of Kenneth and Mamie Clark's findings, then, will need to take into account these and other contradictions apparent in their findings over time as social practices in the broader society changed. Certainly, much research continued on the educational experiences for children of color that moved from the psychological to specific concrete measures of educational attainment based upon access to, participation in, and outcomes from varying types of educational settings during the five decades following the *Brown* decision. Examination of the extant research on the impact of school

desegregation is important because arguments made by school leaders and other stakeholders to justify a return to resegregated schools often point to the disappointing results of desegregation measures, which will be discussed in the following section.

### Desegregation Research

The detrimental effects of race and class segregation on low income and racial minority students in terms of scholastic attainment is well documented (Anyon, 1997; Boger & Orfield, 2005; Burch, 1992; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Freeman, Scafidi, & Sjoquist, 2005; Kozol, 2005; Mickelson, 1999, 2001, 2005; Oakes, 1985, 1987, 1990; Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005; Strickland & Ascher, 1992), including low achievement and attendance, disproportionately higher (expulsion and) dropout rates, less funding and resources, lower quality human resources<sup>5</sup>, and low college attendance rates. Evidence from Amy Stewart Wells' (1995) meta-analysis of long-term studies on the benefits of desegregated schools noted improvements with better college attendance and completion rates and increased integration into mainstream society for African Americans, though little attention has been given to such evidence by school policy makers. Wells and Crain found that when it came to measuring the effects of school desegregation measures, policy makers had traditionally relied upon research that was short-term, usually in the form of standardized test scores within one to two years of the desegregation, as these could produce results that were fast and cheap (Crain, 1976; Wells, 1995; Wells & Crain, 1994). Other short-term studies that narrowly measured desegregation effects based on student achievement offered mixed results, which should have received some attention

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<sup>5</sup> See C. Freeman, B. Scafidi, and D. Sjoquist (2005), "Racial segregation in Georgia public schools, 1994-2001," in J. Boger and G. Orfield, (Eds.), *School resegregation: Must the South turn back?* The authors provided evidence that schools with higher percentages of Black students have less experienced teachers, fewer teachers with advanced degrees, and higher turnover rates for teachers.

by policy makers. Variations in how desegregation was implemented led to differing desegregated settings, which greatly affected results. Importantly, none of these studies on the impact of desegregation accounted for the fact that schools desegregated at the building level could differ widely across schools within the same districts when in-school tracking policies were considered (Crain & Mahard, 1978; Mickelson, 1999, 2001, 2005; Oakes, 1985, 1987; Patchen, 1982; St. John, 1975; Wells, 1995). Indeed, second generation segregation, which is that of tracking children of color to low academic courses and White children to higher levels within the same building, continues to pervade school systems even within the strictures of desegregation orders (Mickelson, 1999, 2001, 2005). Long-term research on the effects of school desegregation, though far less prevalent, has offered important insights on the extent to which school desegregation efforts have benefited students, especially children of color, with regard to integration in mainstream society (Eaton, 2001; Mickelson, 1999, 2001, 2005; Wells, 1995; Wells & Crain, 1994; Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2005).

With the increase in school systems ending desegregation plans after the grant of unitary status, social scientists have taken measures to document the benefits of maintaining integrated public schools to encourage policies that support voluntary efforts. The position of the work directed by Dr. Gary Orfield through the Civil Rights Project continues to support integration plans as part of public education policy. When the Supreme Court agreed in 2006 to review the Louisville and Seattle cases on the place of race in school assignment, 553 social scientists jointly submitted a statement supported by social science research findings to the court that agreed with the two school districts' policies on race-based assignment plans to integrate the schools (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Garces, 2008). The statement they prepared upheld three important conclusions, "(1) racially integrated schools provide significant benefits to students

and communities, (2) racially isolated schools have harmful implications for students, and (3) race-conscious policies are necessary to maintain racial integration in schools” (Orfield et al., 2008, p. 96). This court decision, as mentioned in Chapter 1, struck down the race-conscious efforts of the school districts because they were seen as not narrowly tailored to the interests the districts declared they were seeking. Justice Breyer expressed concern about the lack of understanding of the social context of public schools implicit in this decision, writing, “The lesson of history is not that efforts to continue racial segregation are constitutionally indistinguishable from efforts to achieve racial integration” (*Parents Involved*, 2007). He believed it was “a cruel distortion” to compare the Louisville and Seattle cases with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case (2007).

Because the fate of the future of maintaining racially diverse schools through attendance policies is jeopardized with the court’s latest interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment, it is the important task of research to further distinguish the effects of resegregated schooling contexts on all children, but especially those who suffer most harm from it. To better understand these effects in the present study, it is important to provide background information on the debates and tensions that surfaced with the decision to restructure the local system’s high schools. This is significant, as it brings into relief the understanding that school leaders and community members knew beforehand that the all Black school would never be on par with the other two integrated schools created by the restructuring.

### Background on the Study’s School System

Orfield and Eaton (1996) lament that with eroding legal standards for determining if the “debt” incurred by past discriminatory practices towards Black students has been repaid, school districts “could send students back to neighborhoods schools, even if they were segregated and

inferior” (p. 2). Regardless of the terminology used to sound progressive—“neighborhood schools,” “community schools,” or “priority schools,” segregation is not new, and professing that racially separate schools can be equal reverts to the allowance of condoning a social hierarchy of race within our educational institutions that differs little from that which was present under pre-*Brown* policy era of *Plessy*. Such a perspective is worthy of note because the local school board in this study presented stakeholders with a building plan that included a school restructuring design closely matching what Orfield and Eaton found taking place in many school districts that have undone desegregation plans since the mid 1980s.

### *Local School Restructuring and Resegregation*

During the years after applying for but prior to receiving the grant of unitary status and an Order of Dismissal, school leaders interviewed by the local newspaper expressed concerns about declining enrollments—particularly of White students (Thibodeaux, 1998). Upon receiving the verbal decree by the judge in 1998 to grant the district partial unitary status<sup>6</sup> the board dismantled its single-grade middle schools that had desegregated the district, and changed zone lines that had been operating for the elementary schools (Deffendall, 1999). This had the immediate effect of creating an all Black middle school that was considerably smaller<sup>7</sup> than the two integrated middle schools, possibly an unintended effect of the restructuring, though certainly one that affected outcomes and images of the schools. The attendance lines had been

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<sup>6</sup> The school board filed for Declaration of Unitary Status and Order of Dismissal in 1997. They received partial grant in 1998, but had to improve four areas: advanced placement classes, advanced diplomas, discipline, and dropout/retention rates. Written grant was given by Judge Blackburn in 2000, declaring the system “unitary.”

<sup>7</sup> See the August 13, 2000, *The Tuscaloosa News* article by Lisa Deffendall, “Disparities abound among Tuscaloosa’s three middle schools,” which documented several characteristics of the restructured middle schools after one year of functioning. Dramatic differences in existed between the integrated middle schools and the all Black middle school in standardized test scores, enrollment, disciplinary write-ups, and PTA funding.

drawn with the goal of applying for and receiving the grant of unitary status, so they borrowed many Black students from the West Side to integrate what would have been predominately White elementary schools—a stark contrast for a system with a nearly 70% Black student population.

The school board next sought to dismantle the system's desegregated high school to create three neighborhood high schools that would follow the assignment pattern of the neighborhood middle schools. According to news reportage, all of the white board members favored this design for the high school level while the board's two black members continued to express misgivings as they considered the far reaching consequences it would have for black students living in the western area (Deffendall, 2000a). System leaders attempted to poll local parents, teachers, and students regarding the options of creating one mega high school or multiple neighborhood high schools, though no conclusive reports on these polls were given, save a few statistics presented as footnotes in a later report compiled by an appointed restructuring committee. In that report, some survey results favored a mega high school among some groups, though school leaders worked to change this preference among stakeholders. The board invited an outside consultant from the local university to present research on school size options that would be most beneficial to students. This consultant used small schools research taken from the Chicago Public Schools to promote the move to create smaller, neighborhood high schools. This had an effect, as one teacher explained to me his recall of attending an informational meeting prior to the high school vote that only presented research on the advantages to having multiple, smaller high schools. He recalled wondering why only one view had been presented (field notes, fall, 2006).



A Restructuring Committee was appointed by the board of over fifty teachers, parents, local leaders, and students. This committee was charged with the task of outlining what each scenario—mega or multiple schools—would look like. In May 2000, a document produced by this committee was presented to the board. In this report, the committee cited the small schools research done by Howley and Bickle (2000) to argue that smaller schools offered greater benefits for minority students, while using other findings on school size (Cotton, 1996) to highlight that more academically gifted students most benefited from large schools where more course offerings were available. These two sets of research were considered in light of the zone lines functioning for the newly restructured middle schools, though left a tension over which structure would most benefit the system’s high school students, especially in terms of attracting new students to the system. The restructuring committee recognized this dilemma, concluding, “Thus we have the irony that smaller schools may be of benefit to less affluent students and yet, a three-school scenario virtually forces the creation of an all-Black high school” (*Report of the Restructuring Committee For Tuscaloosa City Schools High School*, 2000, p. 25; in Wortham, 2003b, p. 1A). While the possibility of having only two high schools was brought up, committee members argued that this was not a valid option, as the West and East campuses of the mega high school already reflected this structure, ignoring the fact that two schools with four grade levels would have differed from having one mega school divided onto two campuses by grade level. This option of two schools was discarded by the committee, which then focused on one large or three smaller high schools as the possible structures to consider.

Many school leaders argued in favor of the plan to split the one high school into three separate “neighborhood” or “community” high schools (both terms were used in quotes in news reportage during this time), which was voted on and approved of by school board members along

a color line in August 2000. The only dissenting votes were the two Black school board members, who continued to voice concern for how the arrangement would affect educational opportunity for the students relegated to the all Black school in light of the discouraging outcomes of the new all Black middle school. The vote to disband the mega high school was welcomed by the City Council, with members lauding the school district for taking the initiative to create neighborhood schools—something one council member stated would undo White flight and perhaps attract Whites back into the nearly 70% Black school system (*The Tuscaloosa News*, 2001, p. 6A). Unsettling for many stakeholders was that the high schools, if they followed the middle school attendance lines, meant that one would be all Black and serve working class children. This disturbing fact often surfaced in news reportage and was on the minds of many community members before, during, and after the high school restructuring. It continued to be of great concern to many interview participants in our research during the third year the schools were functioning.

#### *Restructuring Report Committee Debates*

There were indications in early public conversations that some community members were concerned over the increasingly Black demographic of the school system. References to such a belief were found in the district's restructuring committee report. Though not unanimous, the committee listed under "other considerations" the belief by some of its members that only through multiple schools could the system curb White flight to private academies located in the city while attracting enough Whites back to avoid the system from eventually becoming all Black (*Report of the Restructuring Committee For Tuscaloosa City Schools High School*, 2000, p. 38). This justification was quoted directly from the Committee Report in a news article that opportunistically discussed the neighborhood schools, especially the newly created all-Black

school, as the high schools were about to open (Wortham, 2003b). In both of these, the trade-off was presented to justify the creation of an all Black high school—purportedly the only option that could make the city public high schools more attractive than the three local nearly all-White private high schools.

The debates over this justification were not unknown to community members. From the larger project's data set, interviews with teachers at the 100% African American school during the spring of 2004 highlighted a concern by community members that the system would soon become all Black, but went further in their analyses. Some interviewees believed that the system was making every effort possible to avoid becoming a “Birmingham model”<sup>8</sup> where the entire city school system would become Black as outlying areas of White, middle, and upper middle class families separated from the city system to incorporate and support their own schools.

Though not widely publicized, the Restructuring Committee Report (2000) also visited the issue of the “tipping point” argument regarding the projections of the racial composition of the high schools if the system adopted a three high school structure. This argument surfaced as they strategized ways to apportion high profile programs, in this case, the elite International Baccalaureate Diploma Program (IB), to stave off the creation of a second all-Black high school. The committee report stated the following:

East middle school is presently 62% Black. The City Schools' experience is that once a school becomes 70% Black, a tipping point is reached and the school quickly becomes nearly all Black. Accordingly, we are recommending that IB be placed at East MS

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<sup>8</sup> See the article by Stephanie Taylor, “Looking for answers: Census worries local officials,” in *The Tuscaloosa News*, March 16, 2001. This model was mentioned as a rationale for promoting separate neighborhood schools in an interview with one city councilman. His response was precipitated by attrition rates discovered from new census data procedures that were being implemented to more accurately determine city growth.

because IB has proven attractive to non-Black as well as Black students, including students from out of the system, and should help preserve East MS as a mixed race school. We note that present IB classes draw equally from the North MS and East MS zones. In other words, placing IB at another school would likely draw enough White students away from East MS that East MS would be at risk of becoming a second all-Black high school, which no one wants. (*Report of the Restructuring Committee For Tuscaloosa City Schools High School*, 2000, p. 26)

The report included trends in housing patterns to further justify strategies in curriculum placement in order to diminish White flight while ensuring that “children of all colors” would be well served by the restructuring, whatever forms the schools took (p. 26).

#### *Preference Theory and the Tipping Point*

Orfield and Eaton (1996) discussed at great length the problematic use of tipping point arguments in residential patterns—a concept of preference theory frequently misunderstood and misrepresented in court cases involving school desegregation and resegregation. They offered that the problem with assuming people hold ideal levels of integration for Whites and Blacks is the evidence that such attitudes are not strictly private—they are subject to change and there is considerable overlap in Black and White preferences. Although survey research on preferences for integration percentages is often used as evidence in court trials, two fundamental limitations of such surveys are never included: first, they cannot demonstrate the extent to which the expressed attitudes are reflective of past discriminatory practices, and second, they cannot show the extent to which these attitudes may change in the future. Orfield and Eaton argued that because integration overall across the country is increasing with stable integration in many neighborhoods, these factors highlight the logical and empirical flaws with preference theory.

They further warned against relying on preference theory to justify a return to segregated schools:

If courts rely heavily on the preference theory to justify returning to segregated schools, they will be limiting the rights of minority students on the basis of the following unsupported assumptions: that the attitudes are inherent, not the product of a history of ghetto creation and expansion under discriminatory policies; that school and housing desegregation would not improve attitudes and increase stable integration; and that the school districts' hired experts are presenting reliable and impartial evidence on attitudes. (Orfield & Eaton, 1996, pp. 321-322)

It is necessary to include this aspect of the planning phase of the restructuring because it speaks to the contradictions members of the restructuring committee deliberated as they considered nuances of preference theory to explain the changing demographics, as presented in the Restructuring Committee Report:

First, in considering the degree of racial segregation in the City, we must acknowledge that we presently have two (public) majority Black (about 66%) high schools and three (private) almost entirely White high schools. Clearly, the present situation is unacceptable from a racial equity standpoint. The only solution to this larger problem is to reverse the outflow of White students from the City Schools. This can only be done by changing the status quo—essentially making the City Schools more attractive than the alternatives. (*Restructuring Committee Report For Tuscaloosa City Schools High School*, 2000, p. 25)

The report then articulated its primary goal: to attain a higher degree of integration by attracting more Whites back into the city's public high schools. The only way they could achieve this goal

with multiple high schools would be to make one high school all Black, as published in the committee's report, "housing patterns in Tuscaloosa do not permit the drawing of zone lines for three schools without a nearly all-Black school. No one has suggested an alternative three school set of zone lines," (p. 25).

During the final stages of implementing its high school restructuring, the district school board became a recipient of the 2003 Magna Award<sup>9</sup> offered by the American School Board Journal for their \$81 million system-wide building project, "New Schools for New Growth," which was reported in the newspaper (Wortham, 2003a). According to the press release, the board presented this project as one designed to increase city school enrollment through the establishment of neighborhood schools, first at the middle school level and then at the high school level. The board also used the body of literature on findings about small schools, though, to advocate their plan to create a very small, all African-American high school located in the working class African-American community. It is important to include this facet of the restructuring process because aside from increasing racial and class segregation in the city's schools, this configuration of the all Black school left it in a vulnerable position regarding curricular and extracurricular options for its students. With an enrollment of approximately 607 students and nearly one fifth of the student body comprised of special needs<sup>10</sup> students, course offerings at this school by year three would vary greatly from those of other two schools. These

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<sup>9</sup> According to The American School Board Journal's website, this award was given to 24 schools from a pool of some 400 applicants in 2003. School boards were judged on their boldness and innovation in improving education. See Johnny Kampis, April 11, 2002, *The Tuscaloosa News* article. This reported that the board likewise won two awards in 2002 for the restructuring design, one of which was the Magna Award.

<sup>10</sup> In West HS's fall 2005 SACs Report, which was placed on the school's website, the demographic composition of the school included 115 students classified as special needs students out of a total enrollment of 607 students.

characteristics forged differences in programs and course offerings that were directly attributable to institutional practices of zoning and building assignment; they immediately limited rather than sustained or improved educational opportunities for the students attending the much smaller all-Black school.

### *Small Schools and Resegregation*

With respect to the use of small schools as a strategy for enhancing low income, minority children's academic achievement and outcomes, it must be understood how the early versions of small schools were organized and operated. The types of small schools Deborah Meier (1995) and Michelle Fine (1991) advocated from their work in the East Harlem and Philadelphia initiatives, respectively, were not traditional comprehensive high schools; they were schools kept at enrollments of 200 to 400 and required intensive professional development along with special administrative power in the hands of teachers in order to accomplish the academic goals they were targeting for their low income minority students—high graduation and college attendance rates.

The size of the all-Black school in the present study is an important part of how students interpreted the resegregation of the high schools because this created programmatic differences between the schools that were frequently present in the media—from the city schools' web site, to the individual high school web sites, awards presented at school board meetings, recognitions placed in newspaper articles covering local educational news, and high school news videos prepared by students and broadcast weekly through the local television network to each school. The stark contrasts revealed a certain impression regarding the degree of success each school was having to the local community members, including the students. Rather than consider these

contrasts as an outcome of institutional practices that affected the schools' curricular options, other explanations for these differences would surface.

### *Compensatory Programs*

Access to curriculum requires consideration of another strategy commonly used by school districts to dismantle desegregation plans: the use of compensatory programs (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Such a position evolved from the *Milliken v. Bradley*<sup>11</sup> (1974) court decision stating that metropolitan busing plans could not be used to desegregate school districts with high concentrations of minority students. To address how to improve schools with high concentrations of low income minority students, the *Milliken II* (1977) decision allowed compensatory programs to be used in lieu of desegregation plans in areas where there were few Whites with which to desegregate. The court recognized that low achievement was a result of past racial discrimination, but ruled that monetary measures could be used to restore the victims to the status they would have enjoyed had this discrimination not taken place (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Thus, the option of compensatory programs was put into place after the court's ruling against transporting students across larger metropolitan areas that encompassed predominately or all White suburban areas.

Though the school board in the present study argued that creating a small school for the low income minority students would best serve their educational needs, they made no funding commitments or administrative and structural changes required to create the type of small school as Fine's (1991) and Meier's (1995) work had recommended for the types of outcomes they were seeking. After the actual restructuring, the school district divided funding equitably between the

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<sup>11</sup> See *Milliken v. Bradley*, 94 S. Ct. (1974), known as *Milliken I*, in which the court overturned its 1973 decision that would have allowed this policy. The court decided that urban school districts could *not* be integrated through metropolitan plans with neighboring suburbs.



three schools, providing some extra funds, including Title I, Title II, and IDEA monies, to keep class sizes<sup>12</sup> smaller at the all Black high school (and other schools in the western sector). In this way it could not be argued that per pupil funding was a source of the problems West High faced. School enrollment, however, affected the allocation of teacher units per school, which was how curriculum through course offerings was most immediately impacted. West HS students often interpreted their low number of teachers as a serious problem that affected both their opportunities as well as the potential to attract students to their school.

While Orfield and Eaton's (1996) research presented many empirically supported reasons for reconsidering the undoing of desegregation plans, the present study corroborates with and extends their arguments by examining the meaning of resegregation for students experiencing this school context. Student participants in the study noted both the symbolic effects of the resegregation and its numerous material consequences. Although difficult to separate, the distinctions in material resources across the schools often served to reinscribe latent commentary about West HS and its students as being less. Jonathon Kozol's (2005) work, *The Shame of the Nation* demonstrated that often only a functional level of literacy and other lower track remediation courses geared towards vocational education and regular diplomas are offered in high poverty urban schools serving children of color. Though curriculums in inner city all Black schools often suffer due to a lack of adequate funding, which much of Kozol's (2005) work has documented, they can also be greatly impacted by other institutional decisions that actually provide greater funding for high poverty schools in a system through compensatory monies

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<sup>12</sup> See the Alabama State Department of Education web site for a breakdown of the teacher to student ratios. The student-to-teacher ratios were approximately 15 at West HS, 18 at North HS, and 20.8 at East HS. The 2001-2002 State Department of Education statistics for the former West High's lower grade level (grades 9/10) campus was 19:1 and its upper grade level (grades 11 /12) campus of 16:1.

provided by Title I. This occurred in the present study during the initial years of the restructuring. During 2004 - 2005, for example, the system received six million dollars in federal monies for Title1, Title 2, and the Individual Disabilities right to Education Act (IDEA) programs, and much of this was given to schools with the highest poverty levels, all of which were located in the western region of the city. The school system per pupil spending for the high schools differed by geographic sector, as indicated in Table 1. In lieu of a focus on achievement outcomes, the higher spending rates are often used to argue that a system has done all it can to improve the achievement of students attending high poverty schools. This contrast in per pupil spending highlights and corroborates with findings that compensatory programs often are poor substitutes for students of color once they are removed from integrated school contexts (Mickelson, 1999, 2001, 2005; Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Leaders continually pointed out in community and board meetings this funding difference to affirm that everything administratively possible was being done for the western schools.

Table 1

*Per Pupil Spending by District Regions, 2004 – 2005 School Year*

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<u>Region</u>	<u>Eastern</u>	<u>Northern</u>	<u>Western</u>
Amount	\$6,388	\$6,515	\$8,381

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*Source:* Power Point Presentation given to teachers in November 2004 to explain further restructuring of the western region’s elementary schools that closed an underperforming school.

In this study, the material effects of the resegregation were intertwined with the symbolic, often reinscribing the latent white supremacist views and commentary about the West Side students. Losses in programs and courses at the all Black school, including electives and extracurricular activities, would tend to be explained through deficit types of ideas about the West HS students. These material and symbolic aspects of the resegregation affected the enrollment of the all Black school, which intensified lacks in material resources and precipitated a negative school image as perceived by the community. Student participants provided specific examples of losses of academically rigorous coursework and other educational opportunities at West HS, including electives in academic subjects, the option to obtain an Advanced Diploma (the state's college track diploma) Advanced Placement (AP) course options, advanced as opposed to regular course sections, and limited access to fine arts courses due to scheduling constraints. Over time these losses would affect the school's outcomes, and under the mantra of zone choice, families having the resources to do so would flee the western schools while those unable to flee would be left with a curriculum that at best, would only help the majority prepare to pass minimum competency exams for a general (and not college track) high school diploma.

Indirect differences surfaced from board's policy<sup>13</sup> to fund extracurricular activities through private donations. Contrasts in the ability for communities to provide this financial support led to differences in the provision of extracurricular programs from drama tournaments to resources (both financial and human) for such activities as yearbook, school newspapers, band, and homecoming activities. Differences in the availability of academic opportunities at the schools included the following: AP class options, the American Studies program with field trips to other cities, unified as opposed to split math courses, and the option to obtain an Advanced Diploma.

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<sup>13</sup> This policy was the result of multiple years of state-wide pro-ration for funding public schools.

The division of teachers across the schools with curricular specialties, resource allocations, and recruitment procedures, likewise, strangely left certain programs to falter. One example was how second language instruction was initially provided for the academically rigorous IB program, which is premised on fluency in a second language. Other lacks that IB and Pre IB students noted for the IB program were insufficient textbooks for the required preparatory classes, adequate of technology at West HS, communication to families and educators about the IB program, and the provision of teacher units to sufficiently cover preparatory classes for the program without harming class sizes of other courses at the all Black high school.

While material resources differed across the schools, an important change between the old and new structure of the secondary level, and possibly one of the greatest, was school size.

Table 2

*High School Enrollments\* the First Three Years of Restructuring*

School Year	2003-04	2004-05	2005-06
School			
East HS	835	949	1,038
North HS	907	998	1,097
West HS	654	616	623 <sup>14</sup>
Totals	2,396	2,563	2,755

\*Source: The Alabama State Department of Education, Reports: SDE PUBLIC DATA

REPORTS

<sup>14</sup> The West HS SACS Report indicated an enrollment of 607 for the 2005 - 06 school year, which differed from the state report for that year.

The old structure, with its enrollment of approximately 2300 students was divided across two campuses, still allowed access for everyone to multiple sections of courses, numerous electives, and AP course offerings. The newer structure, which continued to follow the original zone lines designed to attain unitary status for the system, divided student enrolment in a lopsided manner, which is illustrated in Table 2. By the third year the gap in enrollment between West High and each of the two integrated high schools increased to nearly four hundred students. Table 2 does not show the impact the restructuring had on enrollments on entire geographic areas during its initial stages. This, however, was another outcome of the restructuring.

With the rather rapid creation of the all Black middle school following the judge's verbal decree of unitary status, for example, one board document of the enrollment trends between the 1999 – 2000 and 2004 – 2005 school years showed an immediate decline of about 200 students in the western region's elementary schools as students shifted to elementary schools in the other two regions. Enrollment trends placed in the newspaper each fall continually highlighted that while public school enrollments increased for the city system, they increased at a greater rate for the county system, indicating a measure of enrollment increase from demographic growth across the county. The city school system achieved their goal of attracting White students into the system's high schools, at least initially, but it could be argued that this came at a price—one that ultimately was paid by a large group of the system's secondary level students.

### *Comprehensive High Schools*

As already mentioned, West High's much smaller enrollment had profound effects on its curricular offerings. This happened, in part, because the school, despite its smallness, operated like the larger two schools in the system—as a comprehensive high school. Historically, comprehensive high schools were promoted under the leadership of James Conant in the 1950s

and '60s (Tozer, Senese, & Violas, 2009). For Conant, comprehensive high schools were advantageous because they would provide curricular tracking for students within the same building: an academic track of liberal arts education for advanced students planning to attend college and general and vocational tracks for students planning to work directly out of high school or attend technical and trade schools. Conant's original purpose of the comprehensive high school was to soften the effects of social distinction that resulted from tracking students into academic (and thus college bound) or vocational courses by placing them together in a large common school. Over time, however, the wisdom of the comprehensive high school became popular as a way to consolidate resources and offer a vast array of courses and electives that would increase differentiated learning opportunities for adolescents. A larger student body meant more course offerings and multiple course sections providing greater flexibility with scheduling. This also allowed schools to meet the special needs of students in more individualized ways through greater variety and levels of academic rigor in course offerings.

The strength of the former West High that educators and other community members often pointed out was the great variety of courses it offered students. This was especially true for the advanced level students; according to participants, the old West offered Pre IB and IB courses, advanced level courses for foreign languages and math, and thirteen AP courses—all options that would be reduced or lost in the multiple schools arrangement. To appease concern that curricular options would dwindle, school leaders espoused the comprehensive school model of the old West, promising to offer every course at the new high schools that the former West had offered. The first year was a difficult transition with much smaller student populations, but the increasing enrollments (of approximately one hundred per year) at the integrated schools soon opened more possibilities for course offerings, especially with the alleviation of scheduling

strictures common to the new smaller schools. Such opportunity would not be true for West, where enrollment remained low (and actually decreased). As it was, the integrated schools had started with several hundred students more than West, so the effects of smaller overall enrollments were much less pronounced for students attending East High and North High during the initial transition years.

The change from the large comprehensive high school to three smaller ones was debated across the community, as many believed the greater course offerings would not be easily replicated in small high schools. Further debate always brought up the uneasy sense that students assigned to an all Black school would suffer from a loss of curricular opportunities. Students recalled parent and community discussions, and often expressed a sense that the change did not have a broad based support. One final piece of the historical background on the schools is needed to highlight this doubt.

#### *Construction Jump Start*

Even as some students enjoyed the new East High and North High facilities, they looked back in time to make sense of why the big West had been split if it had been such an excellent school academically and athletically. Only one student questioned the rush to build the new high schools after the August 2000 vote, something he distinctly recalled observing:

N5MSr: The other thing is—they slapped those schools—not the entire school, but just getting the foundation poured really quickly. They approved it, but all these new board members were coming in right—because there was an election right before the schools were being built. And so they started building the schools so they couldn't turn back and say, "Oh, we won't make these anymore. They voted it down." Or they had, you know, sort of an appeal board. So I remember the elections coming up and there were two

people that were vitally against it—I think they’re in the West area, and I remember my Mom talking about it, and they started building North High and East High very quickly—just getting it up enough to where, you know, they had the wood and stuff up to where they couldn’t say, “Oh, well let’s not do this anymore.” You know. “Oop! The foundation’s already poured. The beams are up. I mean, we’re—we’re already making them.” So I think it was, despite other people’s views or opinions, they built these schools because they knew before they asked people’s opinions that they wanted to build these schools. They were just waiting for some type of approval from the citizens.

Like many adult and student participants, he questioned the degree to which the split of old West High was supported by the wider community. Several North High students took this stance, emphasizing that not all Whites sought to divide the former West. They stated that everyone had benefitted with the programs in the former arrangement—something they lamented losing even three years later. Throughout the study, students paid attention to the actions of leaders over time as they tried to make sense of the justifications for the split.

#### *Summary of Historical Context*

In summary, this section has considered the historical context of race and public education under the *de jure* segregation prior to the *Brown* decision, during the era of desegregation implementations, and in the present day school context after desegregation plans are dismantled. It presented some of the arguments and social science research leading to the *Brown* decision to highlight the salience of the consideration race and color in a particular way by the Supreme Court regarding public education. The color blind position the court took to uphold equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment in the *Brown* case was needed to undo the inequalities rampant in schools under a social context of *de jure* segregation, or in the case of



some states, *de facto* practices of segregation. The color blind position expanded by court rulings of the 1990s, however, has not undone inequality for students of color in our educational institutions, but rather, disregards the discriminatory effects of institutionalized racism that undermine access to educational opportunity. The outcomes of resegregated neighborhood schools require us to reconsider the extent to which color blind policies in our public education institutions today are just and fair for all children under the Fourteenth Amendment provision of equal protection under the law, given the socio cultural contexts they produce. While numerous studies have examined statistical outcomes of desegregation and resegregation, especially in markers of educational attainment and access to opportunity over time, this study sought to present a different type of argument for maintaining desegregated schools. As outlined in Chapter 1, this study was designed to examine one effect a resegregated school context had on high school students experiencing this—what the resegregation meant for these students. Such focus requires the need to develop a theory of meaning and how this will be used in the study, which the next section will address.

#### Ethnography: A Theory of Meaning Needed

In order to conduct a study on the meaning for students of the restructuring of their school system's secondary level organization, which increasingly resegregated a major portion of its Black students after the grant of unitary status, a theory of meaning is needed. In referring to meaning, it is important for me to highlight that I am not talking about personal meaning here. Rather, I will be looking at the intersection of personal meaning and the external conditions that shape or put limits on that meaning. To accomplish this goal, it is necessary to review a major source in the literature that develops a theory of meaning specifically within the context of educational institutions—that of educational ethnography.

### *Educational Ethnography*

This research explores the meaning for high school students of the resegregation they experienced through a school system's mandated school restructuring after it was granted unitary status. The study locates itself in the field of educational ethnography, which examines education as a cultural process (Spindler & Spindler, 1987a, 1987b, 2000). Such studies are premised on (1) the idea that students, teachers, parents, and administrators interpret the social dynamics around them, including those taking place at schools, and (2) the idea that interpretation of those social dynamics influences the ways in which they respond to educational settings. It is the meaning the creation of a racially identifiable high school has for students that this study seeks to document.

### *Cultural Ethnography*

There are two types of educational ethnography that must be reviewed for this study. The first is cultural or interpretive ethnography, which comes from the field of anthropology and is descriptive. In defining this type of ethnography, George and Louise Spindler (2000) wrote that "a true ethnography is an orderly compilation of observations and native cultural knowledge" (p. 252). Ethnographers record observations of the behavior of a target group native to a social context, be it inhabitants of a remote village or children and adolescents in schools. Educational anthropology specifically regards cultural transmission within the schooling context. Though there are more technical aspects of how the observations of behavior are made—for example, that they should be done repetitively in contextualized settings over prolonged time to ensure a measure of validity, Spindler and Spindler asserted that the ultimate purpose of ethnography is "to provide reliable source material for analysis" (p. 252). The model of ethnography Spindler and Spindler advocated was one that could not easily be classified as semiotic, ecological, or

interactionist (among others), all of which were becoming models in educational ethnography. Rather, their model reflected their interest in the study of human behavior in social contexts, which focused on “social interaction and the ways in which these environmental contexts impose restraints on interaction” (p. 248). This knowledge would come through gathering data from natives’ experiences within the social context to elucidate meaning:

We are interested in the meaning that social actors in contexts assign to their own behavior and that of others. We are concerned with the way in which people organize information relevant to their behavior in social contexts. And we try to understand how individuals emotionally load their cultural knowledge, thereby assigning priorities that are not a direct function of the taxonomic ordering of that cultural knowledge. (Spindler & Spindler, 2000, p. 248)

Importantly, the methodology of ethnography is not easily separated from its theoretical aspect. In other words, theory and methodology are inextricably intertwined. While Spindler and Spindler (2000) listed several criteria for a good ethnography, two of the analytic features they described are of particular significance to the present study. One was the consideration of change for human actors in their social context over time. They wrote,

A transcultural, comparative perspective is present though frequently as an unstated assumption. That is, cultural variation over time and space is considered a natural human condition. All cultures are seen as adaptations to the exigencies of human life and exhibit common as well as distinguishing features. (Spindler & Spindler, 2000, p. 249)

This feature is of particular importance to the present study, as the students (and their teachers) adapted to the new structure of the high school in a process that unfolded over several years’ time and within distinct socio cultural contexts. As such, the restructuring was not a fixed event

that remained static before, during, or after its implementation. Not only did meaning come from students' comparison of the three new schools over time, about which they had the most direct knowledge, but also from their understandings of the change from a completely desegregated secondary school level (i.e., the middle and high schools) to one that increased racial division across the school system. Many students felt the need to find an explanation for why the changes mandated by the system's leaders all seemed to have this particular outcome. Furthermore, students looked at the restructuring in terms of how it impacted their personal future, including what else might happen to the schools in the near future as community members, especially families, responded to the changes.

Another characteristic of good ethnography Spindler and Spindler (2000) noted was the unspoken but present socio cultural knowledge that affects a group. They highlighted the importance of drawing this out in ethnography:

Some of the socio cultural knowledge affecting behavior and communication in any particular setting being studied is implicit or tacit, not known to some natives and known only ambiguously to others. A significant task of ethnography is therefore to make what is implicit and tacit to informants explicit. (p. 249)

The analytical feature of drawing out the implicit cultural knowledge of schools is important to the present study, as part of the meaning students made about the restructuring depended upon their frame of reference for the change. For example, some participants saw similarities with the treatment of Blacks to the pre-desegregation era, which they may have drawn upon from extended family members. They knew that it was not *de jure* segregation, yet they saw little difference between the schools of that era and the racial separation that was now taking place in the system. The racial division of housing patterns that came from Jim Crow but continued

across the city reinforced this reality in the present day social context of the school neighborhoods. This led some to develop a theory of gradualism to account for how the change in separating the races at the schools over time was able to take place without protest, a response some believed the stark racial division (as it now existed) should have fostered. While many students did not state this belief overtly, their explanations of events and changes over time supported varying degrees of belief that local leaders and families had the ultimate goal of separating the students racially. In contrast, some expected this as natural rather than by stealth, supporting participants' impressions of the historical racism prevalent in the region that continued to affect the schools. Most students believed the racial separation was inevitable by one mode or another, which the restructuring seemed to support as it unfolded over time. Understanding of the restructuring in this way was not always explicitly expressed by the student participants, but the idea of racial separation was common to their explanations. These were all degrees of meaning of the socio cultural context of the schools created by the restructuring. And though student descriptions of this context were not exactly the same, the tacit and implicit understandings revealed in the participants' responses shed light on how the restructuring refracted across the various levels of student experiences.

As stated in Chapter 1, the study's design is descriptive, with the end of documenting the meaning for students undergoing experiences in a specific social context—that of the unintended consequences of a resegregation created by school policy. This does not pretend that racist practices, including resegregating public schools, should be left without critique. But the idea that resegregation is innocent after fulfilling a certain number of years of a desegregation order has been a dominant view of school policy across the nation, one that needs to be examined. Furthermore, the use of race to better integrate schools is no longer permissible according the

court's position in the 2007 Seattle and Louisville cases, reflecting the degree to which the court enforces a strict interpretation of color blind ideology in school policies—even voluntary ones. All policy, regardless of good intentions, still leads to consequences, intended or not. This research takes the position that in order to better assess the consequences of increased racial resegregation in public schools, it is necessary to provide a descriptive account of what this meant for students as an outcome of such policy. To support the use of cultural ethnography in this type of research, further elaboration on its usefulness is necessary.

One of the greatest contributions anthropology has had to the field of education has been cultural interpretation (Spindler & Hammond, 2000). Educational ethnography has borrowed extensively from its disciplinary seat, educational anthropology, in terms of techniques, tools, methodology, and conceptual orientation, specifically for qualitative research. A distinction is that anthropology and educational ethnography differ in their ends—anthropology has as its main purpose understanding and explanation of cultural processes, while educational ethnography is not just description, but is also used for problem solving because education is an applied field of ethnography (Spindler & Hammond, 2000).

Wolcott's definition of ethnography fits more within the discipline of anthropology: "The purpose of ethnographic research is to describe and interpret cultural behavior," (Wolcott, 1987, p. 43). He was explicit in drawing parameters on the purpose of ethnographic accounts:

They help us understand how particular social systems work by providing detailed descriptive information, coupled with interpretation, and relating that work to implicit patterns and meanings which members of that society (or one of its subgroups) hold more or less in common. (p. 52)

Wolcott did not believe that ethnographic studies “in and of themselves” showed how to improve situations, yet he advocated the need for ethnography in educational research (p. 53). He maintained that through a commitment to cultural interpretation anthropologists could help educators address problems by presenting them in ethnographically informed ways. Like Spindler and Spindler, Wolcott emphasized that ethnography helped identify the implicit meaning found in members of a social system. Importantly, ethnography could never be more than a partial understanding, requiring a cautious approach that avoided gross generalizations. The broader purpose of ethnography for Wolcott, however, was to gain insights into the cultural dimensions of human behavior in the smaller social units of schools, something that would provide wisdom, even if it did not change everyone.

The use of educational ethnography to solve problems is exemplified in a study by Spindler and Spindler (2000) to analyze how the school “may act as a cultural transmitter” and how educators in schools, specifically teachers and guidance counselors, function as mediators of culture (p. 336). This ethnographic essay illustrated how schools differentially selected children to participate in the American (mainstream) dialog of success. They found that some students were invited to this dialog, others were guided to make a positive response to it, and yet others were discarded. From multiple data sources collected over time, they pinpointed discrepancies in educators’ interactions with certain students that clearly showed their prejudices against them. Much of this had to do with the educators’ cultural backgrounds, which affected their perceptions of and interactions towards the students. Their point was that cultural ethnography of school contexts can reveal the mediation of culture that takes place within schools. Spindler and Hammond (2000) highlighted that educational ethnography can join its strengths of being

reflective and active within the descriptive purposes of anthropology to better educate children in our increasingly diverse school settings.

Educational ethnographies have provided valuable insights regarding school institutions precisely because of their premise that ideas emerge from specific contexts. Recognizing this contribution, there are many examples of educational ethnographies within this category that could inform my research (Cusick, 1973; Eaton, 2001; Eckert, 1989; Grant, 1988; Heath, 1983; Jackson, 1990; Levinson, Foley, & Holland, 1996; Lewis, 2004; Lipman, 1998; Metz, 2003; Nesper, 1997; Noblit, 1999; 2004; Pink & Noblit, 1995; Varenne & McDermott, 1998; Wells & Fine, 1993). There is currently a paucity of cultural ethnography that specifically looks at youth within the context of school resegregation, however. Eaton's *The Other Boston Busing Story*, (2001), for example, documented the reactions of Black participants who as children participated in METCO, a voluntary busing program to the suburbs outside of Boston to attend predominately White schools. Though this work sheds light on some of the shortcomings and successes of this program's efforts at integration, the participants were adults who were interviewed many years after this experience. There is a growing body of literature that critically examines the results of desegregation, especially the damaging effects it had when good, Black schools were shuttered. These works tend to use critical race theory as an analytical lens. One example of this is Barbara Shircliffe's work, *The Best of That World*, (2006), a critical ethnography that traced Black participants' experiences with desegregation in Tampa, Florida. Shircliffe documented the losses the participants and the communities experienced when several good Black schools they attended in their Black neighborhoods were closed and they were forced to attend the White schools under desegregation orders. She focused on the losses that Black students endured, especially the loss of supportive, academically rigorous environments as they



were placed in White schools where such support did not exist for them. Like Eaton's work, this included only adult participants who reflected on their experiences with desegregation, though this was some thirty years later. Thus, although there are several ethnographies on desegregation that could inform the current study, none of them approach the same problem that this study seeks to explore. From searches through the literature there are no studies that specifically examine Black and White youth's meaning of partially resegregating a school system's high school after restructuring plans create neighborhood schools, much less while they attend high school through this transition. To provide an example of how the data would be analyzed and written I was left to select a cultural ethnography that best matched the target population within the social context where a social hierarchy of better and less not necessarily reflective of socioeconomic status permeated the context of the high school.

For the purposes of this study, then, I will review only one of the above ethnographies listed in detail, Penelope Eckert's (1989) *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Categories and Identity in High School*, to highlight how ideas constructed within a particular school context affected the ways high school students viewed themselves. Although she did not examine race, Eckert's ethnography is appropriate, as it is a case study of the social structure of high school youth in America.

In her work, Eckert identified a failure to recognize that social categories such as burnouts and jocks are "normal, abiding, conservative—and mutually defining—forces in the school institution" (1989, p. ix). These two categories defined themselves in terms of rejection or acceptance of the values and interests of the school institution. Their respective mutual differences generated a basis for social categorization, and through this clearly defined interpretation of the institution's values, individual students were identified as social beings.

Eckert wrote, “The oppositional social structure, based on the extremes of school orientation, focuses adolescent attention on the narrow set of choices that define the differences between Jock and Burnout categories” (p. 5). The majority of students were in neither category, but these categories provided the vocabulary for the social identity formation of most adolescents at the school.

According to Eckert, the categorizations of Jocks and Burnouts were a result of adolescent competition “for control over the definition, norms, and values of their life-stage cohort” (1989, p. 5). The meaning of categories unfolded within the educational institution. Eckert elaborated,

This does not mean that category membership is strictly determined by class, or that all differences between the categories arise directly from class differences. However, the considerable extent to which class is salient to these categories conspires to elevate the category stereotypes to class stereotypes, to produce a polarization of attitudes toward class characteristics associated with either category within the value laden atmosphere of the school, and hence to force a corresponding polarization of behavioral choice. In this way, Jock and Burnout categories come to mediate adult social class within the adolescent context. (p. 4)

Importantly, through this polarization, the Burnouts learned “how to be marginalized” (p. 181). Eckert asserted that the social context of school is highly significant to learning in that social structures of schools are not only a context for learning but become part of what is learned.

#### *Relevance of Eckert’s Study*

Eckert’s ethnography is useful to this study as it provides insights into how youth constructed their identity through categories created and supported within the school institution.

Eckert's context was a homogeneous group in a suburban high school with minimal class differences and no ethnic divisions, and yet social practices of school resulted in the creation of an exaggerated polarization that became both "immense and limiting" (1989, p. 6). The term "jock" not only indicated athletic involvement but held a broader meaning that signified "an acceptance of the school and its institutions as an all-encompassing social context, and an unflagging enthusiasm and energy for working within those institutions" (p. 3). This cooperative relationship with the school contrasted the burnout category, which signified a relationship that was adversarial. The privileging of one pole in the array of categories led Eckert to assert that, "although school ideology would have all children be Jocks, it plays a clear role in creating Burnouts" (p. 7).

This hierarchy also was the basis for which certain rewards were given. The "Jock core" was associated with school success based on the visibility and prestige students received via teacher approval from elementary school on as students participated in childhood interests and then as older students pursued an array of activities, such as sports (Eckert, 1989, p. 87). This participation led to "the school-based aspect of Jock identity," which developed into a sense of Jock superiority that became a central part of the category conflict that permeated the high school years (Eckert, p. 87). It not only grew as students advanced to the upper grades, but contrasted with the Burnouts' increasing pride they held for their own competence in the world outside of the school, especially with their peer society. Part of this differentiation was affiliated with the school-endorsed power relations available to the two groups. The Burnouts' relations to adults, for example, remained subordinate due to their disciplinary nature. Thus a type of adolescent class was created based on access to resources controlled by adults. Burnout students,

for the most part, had not been model students in elementary grades, so had not been the recipients of teachers' positive attention. Eckert wrote,

Many burnouts are overwhelmed by a sense of unfairness, feeling that factors that they could not control led them, at an early age, to a position from which they could not escape. Many students, not just Burnouts, felt that their relative lack of parentally bestowed resources put them at a disadvantage early on in school—a disadvantage that intensified as school status became increasingly tied to having the right clothes, the right friends and the right interactive style. This feeling was exacerbated for Burnouts through junior high school as their category affiliation itself developed into a basis for discrimination. (1989, p. 172)

Eckert asserted that many working class students were not affiliated with the Burnouts just as many middle class kids did not belong to the Jocks category. But the opposing categories that operated within the school led to expressions reflective of class-related norms along a hierarchy of better and less. The majority of students did not consider themselves to be in one or the other group, yet the students internalized the categories prevalent in the school context. The jocks and burnouts categories worked to force youth to choose between two set patterns of behavior (1989, p. 175).

Eckert maintained that school social structures—particularly social category systems--leave little real choices for adolescents. As she explained, school “is not the same institution for the Jocks and Burnouts, as the members of each group construct their school activity community around themselves, according to their experiences, the activities they engage in there, and their information” (1989, p. 183).

From interviews of the present study, participants were sensitive to and reported on categories of students by such characteristics as building assignment, neighborhood, and curricular programs. One type of categorization used by upper middle class parents of International Baccalaureate [IB] students was the “geniuses and deviants” binary. This expression referred to students attending the all Black school, which served working class and low income minority students, yet housed the IB program where their children were sent each day to take two Pre IB classes. At first appearance, such social categorization could be attributed more to economics than race. In fact, adult participants in the overall study of the restructuring who defended separating students hierarchically for their children’s academic advancement declared that their reasoning was based on the level of academic rigor, which aligned more with the color green (money), not Black and White. IB students from the all-Black school, however, ascribed their sense of being considered as less primarily to their race, school, and geographic region. Phrases they heard or believed were said, such as, “the bad Black kids” (students assigned to the all-Black high school) and “the ‘West Side’ bad Black kids” illustrated a type of categorization they felt resulted from the restructuring. The students reasoned that if Black was bad, then an all Black school would be seen as very bad, marking both the school and the students who attended it. As one student put it, the restructuring seemed like cherry picking, where two desirable schools would flourish, as parents would be attracted to them while one—the all Black school, would clearly never be a school of choice. Further inquiry into the field of educational ethnography is needed, then, to document the types of meanings found in the literature for students experiencing racial subordination in schooling contexts. Critical ethnographies, which this study draws on in a limited way, have more adequately addressed the intersection of race and class within the social context of schools.

### *Critical Ethnography*

While cultural ethnography has been used extensively to study the social context of schools, this type of educational anthropology has not been without critique. George Noblit (2004) explained that cultural ethnography was considered by many as too relativistic, and came to be considered more as a micro theory. Noblit wrote, “It was seen by many as useful at the level of social interaction but as lacking a theoretical base to also be a ‘macro’ institutional and sociocultural approach” (p. 182). To compensate for the lack of theory in educational ethnography, critical theory, which was more philosophical (though lacked a methodology) was synthesized with interpretive ethnography, which had methodology but was lacking in critique. This synthesis led to the creation critical ethnography with the belief that it would expand the sociology of education to address both the theoretical and methodological shortcomings of educational ethnography (Noblit, 2004). The problem with this synthesis was that critical theory and cultural ethnography each came with differing assumptions about knowledge construction that made them difficult to coalesce.

While critical ethnography moves beyond description to include important critiques in the social context of education, its claims to objectivity of cultural beliefs rather than documentations of subjective meanings have been problematic. The tension between the contradictory nature of knowledge as a social construction and the notion that there is an objective reality present in social contexts has never really permitted a solidification of the union of critical theory with interpretive ethnography:

The difference is critical theory’s claims to “objective reality and its determinate representation” (Hollinger, 1994, p. 81; i.e., there is a truth that can be definitively known and that specifies fixed relationships between things) and interpretive ethnography’s

claim that all knowledge, including critical theory, is socially constructed. The former accepted the latter's view that ideas emerge from specific contexts or "situated knowledge" as referred to by Miron, (1996). The latter accepted the former's view to the extent that it accepted the centrality of power and ideology in the social constructions of schools and classrooms. (Noblit, 2004, p. 182)

Importantly, then, even with political ends of critique, critical ethnography is still a constructed form of knowledge and must be recognized as such.

Noblit (2004) saw a continued need for critique in the field of educational ethnography, as this need was not entirely met with the adoption of critical theory. Mainstream research often oppresses, because claims to validity in findings are acts of power that still serve someone's interests. Problematic to both cultural and critical ethnography, then, are objectivity and representation. Qualitative researchers cannot make truth claims that their accounts of a culture are any more accurate than someone else's account. Furthermore, ethnography itself shares its origins with colonialism in anthropology. Thus, despite this lack of coalescence between cultural ethnography and critical theory, there continues to be a need to incorporate a theoretical basis for critique in educational ethnography. While the problem of critique as judgment about research findings in ethnography continues to be an issue for qualitative studies, it is important to contrast the ends of cultural and critical ethnography to better support the former as adequate for the present study.

Critical ethnography traces its roots to Marxist sociology. As such, it has the purpose of critique and intervention, as well as documenting the effects of ideologies and power. There are many definitions of critical ethnography, but Noblit wrote, "One of the central ideas guiding critical ethnography is that social life is constructed in contexts of power" (2004, p. 184).

Although this study does not locate itself specifically within the critical ethnographic tradition, it is influenced by this literature because critical ethnographies have made it a point of discussing the dynamics of class and race on social meaning. To help differentiate cultural from critical ethnography the following has been offered by Thomas (1993), “Conventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be” (p. 4). For the purposes of this study, several critical ethnographies, the majority of which focus on high school youth experiencing a variety of contexts, offer significant insights into the meaning of a racially loaded policy of resegregation through restructuring (Fine, 1991; Foley, 1994; Fordham, 1996; Levinson, Foley & Holland, 1996; Lewis, 2004; Willis, 1977). There are educational ethnographies that are not framed as much with the economic structure, but look at other explanations of reproduction, to which I will now turn (Bettie, 2003; Fordham, 1996).

*Fordham’s Blacked Out*

The critical ethnography I review here is Signithia Fordham’s study, *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High* (1996), which explored the symbolic role of academic achievement for African-American youth. Fordham highlighted the effects dominant discourses surrounding Black identity had on the subject formation of Black high school youth to examine the contradictory ways in which her participants responded to these discourses. She looked at the impact the “ideological hegemony” embedded within the school’s core curriculum had on the academic motivation of Black adolescents (1996, p. 23).

Fordham’s work clearly locates itself within the field of critical ethnography. But since she was not so much focused on the material conditions of class reproduction as the ways in which subject formation and identity reinscribe class, she used a poststructuralist analysis. More specifically, she documented the various discourses about Black students these African



American youth faced as they negotiated the meaning academic success had for them, something, she argued was inextricably tied to their identity. Fordham highlighted that cultural representations constructed by dominant groups are instrumental in creating the social order.

In this study, Fordham found that her participants' achievement was significantly affected due to their alignment with a social group that has been constructed by an "Other" in terms of its history and representation. Resistance as a response to school was self-consciously contrived by these African-American youth who sought to keep or re-appropriate a Black Self while living in a world configured by those of the dominant group (e.g., White). In attempts to create an acceptable Black Self, the youth sought to take control of its imaging. This response was to negate how Whites imaged Blacks, which they saw as a fraudulent representation (created by "Others"). In other words, the binary oppositions of Blackness and Whiteness were created by the dominant culture and promoted through discourses in the community and the school. Black students, however, rejected these normalizing discourses (Foucault, 1980, 1995) that erased their identity while constructing their own Black self. Sadly, this construction worked against students if they entered the path of resistance to the fraudulent imaging of Blackness by a rejection of academics.

Fordham's ethnography examined how students' self-representations were affected by the images created within schools as a result of practices that normalized student attitudes and behaviors in particular ways. Her findings showed that such discursive and non-discursive practices (Foucault, 1972, 1995) categorized the African-American students as "intruders"—a designation of which they were well aware (Fordham, 1996, p. 10). She documented the constant surveillance by these youth of the gazes (Foucault, 1995) that came from peers and cohorts as they searched out signs of misrepresentation and appropriation of images of the

Other—what they termed “acting White.” In this context, the students demonstrated resistance as both conformity and avoidance (Foucault, 1990). Fordham traced these resistances back to the formal curriculum—“with its built-in omissions and deletions”—that forced students to appropriate identities to resist a “fraudulent representation” of who they were (p. 10). Foucault (1995) had highlighted that individuals internalize the discourses to which they are subjected through the operations of normalization. Individuals learn to monitor themselves to determine whether they exhibit the characteristics judged as acceptable through the normalizing practices of a social group. Though individuals come to police themselves at the level of their own subjectivity, they also claim identity positions provided by the normalizing discourses. Fordham found that the students she studied at Capitol High “police their own racialized identities while concurrently seeking the prestige traditionally defined as the rightful prerogative of persons whose geographical place is regarded as European in origin” (1996, p. 10).

Fordham sought to determine the extent to which the image of Blackness as a cultural symbol continued to be seen as a barrier to academic achievement. The students were conscientious of the scientific analyses of the racialized Other—discourses that naturalized this imaging of Black youth. In many cases, this led to responses of resistance as avoidance, which negatively affected the direction for future academic and career opportunities for African American youth. Her analysis provides insight into the ways in which the presence of these dividing practices and normalizing discourses affected their academic achievement. She used this insight as “a corrective representation” to counteract two mistaken, but commonly held beliefs about African-American adolescents who want to maintain a Black Self within a safe, cultural space (1996, p. 10) First, her findings showed the falsity of the notion that African-American youth do not want to achieve in school or succeed in life. Second, they demonstrated

that success is not only a social process that occurs, based on motivation and ability, but that success is far more complicated for African American youth. She argued that schooling continues to promote the norms established by the dominant group in America, making it necessary to examine responses of resistance to academic learning in order to reassess the impact the core curriculum has on the academic motivation of Black youth.

#### *Significance of Fordham's Study*

Fordham's work is significant to the present study in that both consider a racial hierarchy present in the school context. The contrast is that Fordham's study looked at identity, which comes from the field of social psychology, as she examined student responses to the way Blackness was defined by the dominant culture. The present study, though not based upon identity, does consider the social context of race that was created through a policy that espoused a color blind ideology. Fordham's study had the political end of critiquing the dominant, but fraudulent representation of Black youth and how they responded to this through resistance in school contexts. The present study is located within a similar context of racial dichotomy of better and less as a result of the creation of an all Black high school alongside two integrated high schools. It serves as a descriptive account of student meaning of the resegregation. This study considers that resegregation is an unintended consequence of a color blind ideology that undergirds the Fourteenth amendment protection of equal rights, and that the implications this has for the well being of children's schooling must be identified.

Students attending the all Black school noted the increased racial separation of students over time and drew on their experiences of this to explain that this was the desired goal of the restructuring. Evidence of this meaning came because they heard that even with the high school restructuring, people across the community commented that the integrated schools were

considered to be “too Black” and that many West Side students would need to be “sent back” to the all Black school to correct this anomaly. Community members often told students attending the all Black school that they would not send their children there because it had so much fighting. Students also heard that their school was seen as dangerous, and that White parents did not want their children attending school with them out of fear or the belief that they would not learn as much. Enrollment patterns over time confirmed these community beliefs to them. Like Fordham’s participants, students in the present study demonstrated resilience and resistance to the community ascription of their school as “less,” though often felt they were powerless to undo the racist beliefs about them. These students were aware of a hierarchy as a given based upon school building assignment and one’s race and neighborhood, but found it confounding that such categorization placed their school and those attending it at the negative pole when it offered the most academically rigorous curriculum in the school system.

While undeniably there is an element of class-based dynamics present, at the same time, other forces at work appeared to reinscribe Blackness in a certain way in the present study. As a few students argued in interviews, if White parents always want the best curriculum for their children, why wouldn’t they send them to the all Black school for the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program—unless there were other reasons to avoid it? In this process of trying to analyze what was wrong (in that “other” students did not enroll), they sifted through an array of possible explanations for their low and all Black enrolment—teacher quality, facilities, school violence, and region of the city, only to conclude that the problem was that restructuring had created them as “West Side” bad Black kids. Such construction held no element of truth for them, yet they internalized this image as they attempted to change racist stereotypes of peers and community members.

While both cultural and critical ethnographies on youth in schools inform this work, this study is a cultural ethnography designed to provide a descriptive account of student responses as a partial attempt to understand the sociocultural aspects of resegregation. It does not attempt to refract differing types of Whiteness or Blackness that certainly were present, but rather, focuses on student meaning about resegregation. This study uses the student responses as the unit of analysis to examine the ways in which a resegregated school system created a social context that influenced how students understood themselves and their sense of possibilities. More specifically, this study examines the meaning of resegregation for students in a school system going through a restructuring plan that increased system-wide segregation because such documentation provides an important dimension of schooling that has been little researched, yet increasingly has been taking place in school systems across our nation.

This chapter has highlighted some of the research on the outcomes of desegregation and trends as a result of resegregated school contexts. It examined some of the legal precedent that illustrates a shift in the court's interpretation of unitary status towards a color blind ideology that undergirds the Fourteenth Amendment. Background information was presented on the local school system's debates about undergoing a restructuring that would create an all Black school, with some analysis of the justifications leaders presented in light of Orfield and Eaton's research on school systems that have dismantled desegregation orders after the grant of unitary status. The work of Kenneth Clark and others was discussed to highlight the need for the use of cultural ethnography to document meaning to argue the need for work that assessed the new form of racial segregation prevalent in our schools today. A brief discussion on educational ethnography was given to support the use of cultural ethnography as suitable for providing a descriptive account of the meaning high school students made of the restructured schools that increased

racial segregation. This is not a critical ethnography, as it is not critiquing with a political end in view nor does it focus on structural determinism as a source of thought for students, such as how the structure of legal thought or culture influences the legal content of the interpretation of the Fourteenth amendment as a color blind ideology. This study draws on critical ethnography, as that body of literature provides a backdrop of how race has and continues to play an important role in how students interpret the school policies they experience. Resegregation promotes the concept of racial hierarchy in this interpretation even if this is not an intention of school leaders or an intention of color blind policies undergirded by the law. Chapter 3 will consider cultural ethnography as methodology, while framing the specific design of the study.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

As outlined in the previous chapter, in order to conduct a study on the meaning the partial resegregation of a formerly desegregated school district had for high school students it was necessary to provide a way in which to analyze the effects of the institutional dynamics on individual meaning. The conception of meaning used in this study is relatively straightforward. The study documents the sense students were making of the restructuring process through cultural ethnography.

#### Cultural Ethnography

In Chapter 2, a discussion was presented on the two types of educational ethnography, cultural or interpretive ethnography and critical ethnography. In order to conduct a study that describes how students interpreted their newer school context, cultural ethnography was chosen as appropriate to meet the study's goals. This study is descriptive in that it documents the meaning students made of their experiences in one school system's high school structure that increased race and class based segregation at the secondary level. As highlighted in the previous chapter, critical ethnography, though useful to examine the effects of class and race as sources of student meaning of the resegregation, was not chosen for this particular study. Critical ethnography assumes non-dominant groups experience oppression and that although they can articulate this oppression, their voices are often overlooked in decision making, including decisions defining the features of institutional organizations that are locally controlled. Unlike critical ethnography, the present study leaves open the possibility that the creation of

neighborhood schools, characterized by increased race and class segregation for a significant portion of the system's students, can have positive effects on these students. This includes the idea that the benefits neighborhood schools can offer to traditionally marginalized groups mitigate or remove the noxious effects one race schools were found to have had for Black children previous to *Brown* or from desegregation plans that continued racially segregated structures through academic tracking in those schools. The court's position through the *Brown* decision struck down the use of race in public school attendance policies, though drawing on this same argument in today's school contexts provides legal support for resegregated school contexts to once again exist through neighborhood schools policies (*Parents Involved*, 2007). Resegregation thus becomes the unintended consequence of sustaining the democratic ideal of a color blind society, though many would argue that desegregation orders have accomplished the goal of undoing the effects of public school segregation borne from sixty years of Jim Crow laws. The important issue here is that for the court, the slate is blank regarding the historical effects of racial discrimination in schools. Furthermore, schools created through measures that resegregate students racially and by class have an equal chance to become successful neighborhood schools. Implicit with this view is that resegregation does not carry with it the significance that *de jure* segregation practices in schools did prior to *Brown*. These are all assumptions of a color blind attendance policy.

Much rhetoric was placed in community discussions by leaders highlighting the potential a multiple schools structure had for greater student involvement as three sets of school athletic teams were created, three sets of school clubs and organizations were formed, and three sets of leadership opportunities became available to students. Would students experience this format of greater curricular opportunity or would they detect differences in their access to educational



opportunity across the three newly created neighborhood high schools? And if they noted differences, how would they explain these? These were the types of understandings that could be elucidated through documenting the change by use of the analytical tool of cultural ethnography.

### Cultural Ethnography as Methodology

The use of ethnography as a research tool is done to “provide an in-depth study of a culture that includes behavior, interactions, language, and artifacts” (Berg, 2004, p. 69). Importantly, this requires presenting (and therefore having a clear understanding of) the perspective of those native to the culture being examined. Such work holds as implicit a commitment to a distinct type of methodology (Berg, 2004; Spradley, 1979). For the purposes of the present study, two of these are of particular relevance. First, the ethnographer must think within the perspective of those members of the social group under examination (Bloor & Wood, 2006). Geertz (1988) explained that for this to take place, there is a need for the researcher to become immersed in the culture by collecting data naturalistically within the same culture setting rather than remaining outside as an objective, distanced observer. The primary data source was conversations with students in small groups from all three new schools about their experiences with the new school context through the use of open-ended questions to draw out what students believed about the restructuring given these changes. Conducting numerous focus group interviews did not mean that I automatically attained the understanding of an insider, but having done preparatory work, which included gathering archival data from local newspaper reportage of the restructuring process, attending school board meetings, attending school athletic functions, and interviewing over forty teachers for two years prior to conducting the student interviews helped to immerse me in some of the issues that surfaced with the new school context. Time

spent beforehand on formal interviews and informal conversations with teachers were especially helpful in identifying issues of importance to students, as many offered a perspective of how their students were reacting and responding to the restructuring changes over time.

A second methodological commitment required of ethnography is the understanding that it only offers a relativistic form of knowledge, as already discussed in Chapter 2. I return to this point, as it is significant, methodologically speaking. As Berg noted, “There is no one objective reality, but a number of realities” within the social group studied (2004, p. 70). Given the historical context of the restructuring, I believed this would be true for groups aligned along grade levels, by building assignment, and by race intersected with neighborhood and attendance zone. The realities and interpretations of seniors, for example, would differ from those of underclassmen, as they were the only group that experienced the old integrated high school while in ninth grade. They were also the first group to face the restructured middle schools, and many of them at West HS likened the high school restructuring to that racial division and what that meant for them. Thus, even within a grade level, there would be experiences and meanings that were distinguished by building assignment within the same school system. An overall pattern that illustrates the types of meanings of the restructuring regarding the racial division could be given as follows: North HS students would see that the racial division through the restructuring made their city and state look bad (as it continued to operate with racist ideologies that only laws could hold in check) and East HS students would decry the racial segregation as unethical, noting that the new school structure only promoted further racial division through the *de facto* housing patterns it encouraged, while those marginalized in the all Black school read a social text from every aspect of their schooling that told them they were “less” than peers attending the integrated

schools. There were many realities, then, all of which created a variegated meaning of the restructuring for the high school student participants.

The above concerns of ethnography require special methodological commitment to be able to obtain data from natives in a given social context. The methodology must allow the researcher to observe how people behave over an extended period of time, listen to what is said, and observe what is done and what happens, all of which contribute to documenting meaning. This leads back to the design of the study, which is descriptive. In keeping with the methodological traditions of educational ethnography, it relies on student informants to gather data about their experiences. The primary method of data collection was focus group interviews with students to document student understandings. It was anticipated that student discussions in response to open-ended interview questions with peers would surface the various types of experiences they had under the new school context. Closer examination of the issues students discussed would help to surface their understandings of the new structure to document meaning. Although several ethnographies have been done with adult participants to describe their experiences with desegregation many years after the fact, a study that interviews students as they experience an increasingly racially resegregated school context is fairly unique. The study sought to fill this gap by examining student reactions to this particular context of schooling. Again, the design of the study was descriptive as there was no guarantee that this demographic division of the students would be viewed by them as reflective of supporting racial subordination if each region had its own neighborhood school and leaders insisted that they would be equal.

Educational ethnographies have provided valuable insights regarding school institutions precisely because of their premise that ideas emerge from specific contexts, but this also requires a look at content analysis of the data collected. An important factor with this particular data set

is that the schools were defined in special ways by virtue of their demographic make-up. Each school served a population group distinguished from the others by race, class, and proximity to the school by geographic region. The research questions sought to determine the extent to which these distinctions would shade the interpretations the students had of the restructuring. After identifying the specific research questions, a further look at the content analysis will bring out how the study's design will elucidate the shades of meaning across the student groups.

### The Research Questions

This literature provides a suitable theoretical framework through which to investigate the research questions of this study, which are repeated and elaborated upon below: How are high school students interpreting the establishment of a partially resegregated school system as a result of mandatory school district restructuring? This question will include the following sub-questions: (1) what views were given by others, including media, as perceived by students, (2) what curricular options, including levels of academic rigor were available to the student participants, (3) student understanding of funding extracurricular activities, and (4) what the students' sense of individual possibility were in terms of future education, employment, and participation in mainstream society? After a review of the literature on the impact racial segregation has had on students of color prior to and after *Brown*, especially some of the indications provided by the social science research, a second question was needed: what types of white supremacist messages, if any, were implicit or explicit in the meaning students gave of the resegregation? To elucidate the impact of the ways students responded to these messages present in the social context of their schooling, this requires a sub-question: how are students' interpretations of the restructuring related to them as students and citizens?

An important part of the meaning the resegregation had for these students included their perceptions of what they believe peers in the other schools were receiving or to which they had access, and how this framed their own sense of possibility. Through a partial resegregation of the system's high schools where two schools remained racially integrated and a third became identified as the all Black school, students experienced distinct structural arrangements that were highly intertwined with race, class, and perceptions of their abilities or interest in education. This question examined how these differences were interpreted by students as they made meaning of these contexts.

The research question and sub-questions provide a way to document the meaning the restructuring has for students as it examines the multiple aspects of a restructuring process that increases race and class-based segregation. The goal of this study was to analyze these meaning-effects the restructuring has had on students' views of their educational trajectory and the possibilities this fosters or inhibits.

### Unit of Analysis

The topical framework set up in Chapter 2 provides a general unit of analysis for this study, which is the effect of macro-social dynamics on the individual meanings taking place within the micro-social context of school. The connection between these two levels of analysis has been framed using cultural ethnography to elicit how institutional arrangements of public high schools color the experiences of students. Student responses provided both the concepts and to some extent, desires that influenced the individual student experience of their schooling experience. I looked primarily at how resegregation was interpreted by individual students attending three high schools in the same school district.

In the following section, I provide a description of the data that were collected for the research, along with a description of the data analysis as it relates to cultural ethnography. Each sub-question requires a write-up that uses a descriptive analysis. With these considerations, the data collection methodology is presented as follows.

### Data Collection

The primary source of data for this study included a total of twenty-one focus group interviews with 135 students from the three high schools. Additionally, individual follow-up interviews were conducted with five selected students. Students from all three of the system's high schools were interviewed in order to document their interpretations of changes taking place throughout the district during the restructuring process over time. This convergence of multiple data sources for student interviews provided a way for the primary source of data to be triangulated (Denzin, 1978).

Permission from the system's Central Office for the overall study was granted in the fall of 2003 by the superintendent of the school system. The researchers were provided with an office space in a small, unused classroom at the all Black high school and individual interviews with teachers from all three schools were conducted on a voluntary basis between spring of 2004 and spring of 2005. The following school year, building administrators were contacted by email to request their permission to interview students at the schools by the researcher. All three administrators allowed me to attend a faculty meeting to present the research and elicit teachers' voluntary assistance in inviting their students to participate in the study. A sign-up list was passed around, with teachers providing contact information if they were willing to present an invitation to participate in the study to their students. Several teachers allowed me to come to classroom to provide a five minute presentation about the research and pass out consent forms

for participating in the study. Other teachers took the consent forms and presented the opportunity to participate to their students. Interviews took place after school, during Black History Month in social studies or English classes, and in classes where students had review study sessions for final exams. Participation rates were affected by students forgetting to return consent forms or because students opted to take another choice of activity during the scheduled interview time.

A breakdown of the participation rates from the schools is provided in Table 3. Out of approximately 150 participants who returned consent forms, only a total of 135 were included in the chart as participants, as these were the students who actually spoke in the interviews. The totals, then, reflect this smaller number of participants, which more accurately represents the data collected. For example, at times, transfer students from other school systems who returned consent forms expressed interest in the study, but because they were unfamiliar with the school system, remained silent.

Table 3

*Participants by Grade*

School	West HS	East HS	North HS
Grade 9	22	0	0
Grade 10	1	11	7
Grade 11	19	32	1
Grade 12	27	8	7
Totals	69	51	15

## Secondary Data Sources

Secondary sources of data collected for the study included documents obtained from attending board meetings, board member documents open to the public, field notes from non-participant and participant observations of board meetings and school functions, and documents from legal hearings on the original desegregation orders as well as the solicitation for the grant of unitary status by system leaders. Additionally, approximately ten years of newspaper reportage covering the entire process of the restructuring spanning from 1997 to 2007 was collected. This collection of data allowed for triangulation across primary and secondary data through the convergence of data from multiple data collection sources (Denzin, 1978). A more detailed explanation of both primary and secondary sources of data is provided below.

Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for interviewing teachers, administrators, and students for the large restructuring project, of which this research is a part, was granted in the fall of 2003 and application for renewal was approved of in the fall semesters of 2004 and 2005. The IRB approval was granted based upon the city school board approval of the research project. Copies of the focus group interviews and individual follow-up interviews for students are included in the Appendix.

Permission by building administrators from the all Black high school in the district was granted for teacher and student interviews during the fall of 2003. The overall research project received special support in the form of a small classroom as an office as well as the opportunity to provide professional development workshops for teachers by the primary researcher of the overall project. This gave me considerable access to the school. The continual contact with teachers and administrators built up trust that advantaged the collection of student data from the all Black school more so than the other schools. The time lag in collecting teacher data in the



two integrated schools, as well as the short time spent by the researchers in said schools posed limits on the level of commitment to the project, including faculty support of student interviews. Permission for teacher interviews was granted by building administrators for the other two high schools in the fall of 2004. The process of conducting individual teacher interviews began at a second high school in November 2004 and at the third high school in February 2005. I include this timeline, as work at the all Black school continued between 2003 and 2005, thus keeping a level of interest in the study. Student interviews began late in the fall semester of 2005 and continued into the spring semester of 2006, ending one and a half weeks before school officially finished.

### Student Interviews

As previously mentioned, student interviews were the primary source of data for this topic. Students were selected opportunistically in several ways. First, teachers played a significant role in the selection process, as they chose the classes to which the invitation to participate in the study was extended. This was particularly true for teachers whose content area seemed to fit with the nature of the research, such as the Civil Rights movement, writing persuasive speeches, the effects of class and race on participatory democracy in a government economics class, or even a psychology class that studied behavioral science where a teacher thought the experience of participating in social science research would help her tie in concepts with a real life experience. Part of the criteria teachers told me they used was to select students based on their maturity, willingness to express ideas, and an interest in the events surrounding the restructuring. A frequent comment by teachers, for example, was that the group was selected because students actively participated in class discussions. With permission from the building administrators of each high school, a short presentation was made to faculty and staff at a faculty meeting to

request their assistance in selecting students. Several teachers at the racially identifiable high school requested that their entire class participate in the study because of the ways in which the issues coincided with course objectives, such as the historical context of Black education during Black History month. Other invitations required that students come after school. This time greatly reduced participation rates due to student participation in extracurricular activities as well as the need to provide one's own transportation home.

It was known that grade levels had distinct experiences with the restructuring because the first racial separation of students began at the middle school level several years prior to the restructuring of the high schools. This study, however, focused on the long-term effects the restructuring had on students. It must be recognized that the effects of nostalgia some senior students (graduates of the class of 2006) still had for their experiences of attending the former mega school as freshmen were unavoidable. Nevertheless, the outstanding feature of this group was that this was the last time a major portion of the senior students in the district were in an integrated school setting, so importantly, this nostalgia was intertwined with a recall of integrated school contexts, which needed to be elucidated from student emotions surrounding truncated relationships.

All attempts were made to include a representative sample of students at each school, to include gender, grade levels, and academic levels (regular, advanced, AP, and IB). Beyond the control of the interviewer was the inclusion of student participants from a variety of extracurricular activities and electives, though there were informants in many interviews who had these experiences and often provided insights on how these were impacted by the restructuring. Follow-up interviews were offered to a few students who expressed a desire to include other information they deemed important or missing from the interview. Five of these

were more formal, and were conducted after school, during a lunch block, or during part of a Student Government Association (SGA) block. These usually included similar open ended questions targeted to the student's specific experiences or to have the student elaborate more on their responses in the focus group interview. One student who had missed her group interview willingly took time to respond to the same protocol questions. Although not an individual interview, several students approached me at the end of the interview session (usually when the class bell rang) to give additional brief comments on personal experiences they believed gave credence to some of the perspectives students had expressed during the interview. These additions were collapsed into the focus group interview, as they were not separate or new interview questions. Two students reticent to speak in the group wrote brief comments in response to a question and passed these to me at the end of the interview. These, likewise, were collapsed into the interview data.

Almost all focus group interviews lasted from 50 to 65 minutes and were comprised of anywhere between three and fifteen students (usually ten or more), while three pilot interviews during the initial phase of the student interviews occurred in much smaller groups of three or four students, and lasted approximately 30 minutes.

#### Focus Group Format

Focus group interviews were chosen as the method for gathering data from students as it provides a supportive environment that encourages discussion, the expression of various points of view, and allows for differing opinions to surface (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Furthermore, it allows for flexibility, should unanticipated issues arise that are important to the participants. It is considered to have a high rate of face validity (Marshall & Rossman). Spradley (1979) identified ways to interview that elicited more substantive information from participants,

including probing questions, the use of friendly conversation, opportunities to speak in turn-like fashion, and the ethnographer's conduct of expressing ignorance and interest to encourage greater elaboration from participants. The general format that I used, which will be detailed below, was to follow the above strategies with the same interview protocol for each group. The questions were open-ended, allowing much room for varying student experiences to be voiced. Students spoke far more than I did as an interviewer. When it seemed that they were making important points or if there could be confusion in what they meant, I stopped to ask questions that would help them clarify their meaning. At times I repeated what I thought I heard them say in statement or question form or expressed ignorance to get a better explanation of the students' examples they were providing.

The three pilot focus group interviews were held in the office offered by the school administrators from the racially identifiable school to the researchers. Small groups of students came downstairs for approximately thirty minutes and then returned to their classroom so that another group could participate. One other large group was interviewed in this research office, while all other interviews were held in classrooms. Students at the eastern school were interviewed in their classrooms. Those students who had not returned consent forms remained in a different part of the classroom and listened quietly without responding to questions or had passes to the library. In the third school, students were interviewed after school in a classroom offered by a teacher, during the SGA block in a study room in the school library, or the research room at the all Black school where some students attended class for part of the day.

To prepare students for the interview, I provided simple guidelines. They were to raise their hands to speak and to wait until the tape recorder was close by to respond. Students were given cardstock and thick markers to write their first names on name tents. This was so that I

could call on them when they wished to speak and to allow me to record who the speaker was for later identification purposes with coded data. In order to obtain a clear recording of the interviews, I asked for a student to volunteer to carry a battery powered audio recorder to students who wished to speak. As I called on students, the volunteer walked over to record the response. As a student responded, I wrote the student's name along with a few of the phrases he or she said to facilitate accuracy in labeling which student was speaking during transcribing. If students spoke softly or had a thicker Southern accent and pronounced words in unfamiliar ways to me, I quickly wrote those words and phrases to help cue me for the transcribing so as to lessen the possibility of losing data. At times, if students spoke before the tape recorder was near, I asked them to repeat what they said, even though the recorder usually picked up their comments clearly from a distance. When a student had special reactions or gestures, I recorded these next to that student's name as he or she spoke.

#### Other Document Sources

Because of the researcher's involvement with the district's International Baccalaureate curriculum, multiple informal interviews with the new coordinator appointed in the spring of 2004 continued throughout the research process. Additionally, notes and outlines produced by this coordinator on events and difficulties in such issues as recruitment and resource allocations have been graciously provided to the researcher. Inclusion of a study of this curriculum is significant as the location of this program spurred conflict and deliberation, with comparisons of the schools becoming part of public statements. At the same time, participation in the preparatory courses for this program led to the busing of students from the two integrated high schools to the all-Black school for part of the day, which generated much discussion among students, teachers, and parents.

To enrich the data set, data collection included documents from the process of applying for and receiving the grant of unitary status for the system, state department records on testing results for NCLB spanning from the three restructuring years studied (spring 2004 to spring 2006), and roughly ten years of newspaper reportage from the local newspaper. Because of electronically available news articles, those collected from March 2001 onward were saved in their entirety to help provide a timeline of events and issues participants believed important as they emerged over time, as well as to provide an idea of the types of information available to students through the public narrative present in the media. News articles from earlier reportage were retrieved from the local public library's archives. Non-participant data collection included field notes taken from attendance at board meetings, faculty meetings, community meetings, and extra-curricular events, such as athletics, homecoming, music concerts, and graduation ceremonies. Additionally, two years of school board documents, spanning from the fall of 2005 to late summer of 2007, that are of public record were provided to researcher. Other information was taken from the school system's website on the pending rezoning provided to the public as well as information from the individual high school websites, including Southeastern Accreditation of Colleges and Schools (SACS) reports, School Improvement Plans (SIPs) and such archives as school newspapers and recognitions accessible electronically from individual school web sites.

### Representation

A traditional ethnographic format was used to organize the entire study. The dissertation is presented as a study of one school system's restructuring. At the most general level, the study documented the way students interpreted the meaning of that restructuring. This is important because it is the meaning of the restructuring—what individuals take to be true and how they

respond based on those understandings—that has real consequences for the lives and experiences of students. This study has been influenced by critical ethnography, which moves beyond the descriptive level of cultural ethnography by assuming that inequities are present, and that through careful analysis these can be detected. Importantly, I highlight that it is not a critical ethnography, although those ethnographies contribute to the understanding of student responses within social contexts of schools that are characterized by racial difference. As outlined in the literature review, student meaning of the restructuring will be analyzed. The unit of analysis was the students' interpretation of the new school arrangement. Examples of this kind of analysis of educational change in the form of educational ethnographic studies are myriad. Among the existing studies that were used as models for this study are Varenne and McDermott's (1998) *Successful Failure: The School America Builds*, Eckert's (1989) *Jocks and Burnouts: Social Category and Identity in the High School*, Fordham's (1996) *Blacked Out: Dilemmas of Race, Identity, and Success at Capital High*, Lewis' (2004) *Race in the Schoolyard: Negotiating the Color Line in Classrooms and Communities*, Holland and Eisenhart's (1990) *Educated in Romance: Women, Achievement, and College Culture*, Bettie's (2003) *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*, and Lipman's (1998) *Race, Class, and Power in School Restructuring*. The methodology for analysis of each research question is outlined below.

#### *Mode of Analysis: Students*

This section provides a more detailed look at how the content analysis of the data was conducted. Open coding typically is a first step in the process of analyzing interview data. Though this level of analysis provides useful categories and lists from the data, it does not draw out how categories are related dimensionally. Strauss and Corbin (1998) emphasized the need for a second round of coding, called axial coding, which allows for an analysis that operates at

two levels—what the respondents have said (their actual words) and the conceptualization of these by the researcher. Strauss and Corbin provided a succinct explanation of the purpose of axial coding, which differs from the purpose of open coding, “is to begin the process of reassembling data that were fractured during open coding. In axial coding, categories are related to their subcategories to form more precise and complete explanations about phenomena,” (p. 124). Strauss further stated:

Among the most important choices to be made during even these early sessions is to code intensively and concertedly around single categories. By doing this, the analyst begins to build up a dense texture of relationships around the “axis” of the category being focused upon. (1987, p. 64)

Coding axially is the use of questions about the data, such as why, where, when, how, or with what results, to uncover relationships among the categories or codes of data. This analytical process can help to establish a paradigm of behavior that follows a simple organizational scheme—the conditions that were present in the social context, people’s responses to these, and the consequences of these actions or interactions, including a failure of groups to respond to situations. Importantly, Strauss and Corbin (1998) stated that while this does provide structure for findings it should never be reduced to a cause and effect model, which is far too simplistic. Rather, respondents can make choices and there are multiple factors that influence the types of choices they can make. Working with this type of structure, however, allows the researcher to elucidate a complex level of interrelationships to explain what is taking place.

The student interviews were all transcribed prior to beginning the coding process, and all of the interviews were coded twice using QSN-R6 software. The first set of coding was open coding, where approximately 240 categories were created. These were categories with



subcategories that I then linked by properties and dimensions. Because issues were complex and interwoven, I used the open coding categories and subcategories to create a conceptual map rather than just a set of lists that were descriptive. By examining the data at the conceptual level, I saw the need to recode the data to bring clarity to these concepts. I collapsed and eliminated some original codes, and created some new codes, arriving at a list of 114 codes, several of which included codes for demographic characteristics such as race and school assignment. In the second round of coding the data, specific terms were created as codes to allow me to trace how these entered into student explanations of the restructuring and under what features of the restructuring. An example of this would be associations of bad with being Black or ghetto with the West Side as explanation for why students believed leaders and White parents wanted to separate Black students from White students. Interviews were coded for both symbolic and material effects of the restructuring, including students' sense of possibility through student representations of the other schools, the possibilities (opportunities) they believed students attending the other schools had, and what peers, local leaders, and other community members thought about their school. The unit of analysis was the student responses, so particular attention was given to how students viewed each neighborhood school and the types of descriptors that surfaced in comparisons or commentary about the schools—such as “West Side,” “the bad Black kids,” “all-Black school,” or “the White schools,” are referred to. Also, attention was given to the types of statements students make regarding how their school experience fed into their perceptions of the possibilities they had for their futures, be it through post-secondary education, employment, and where relevant, integration into mainstream society. Some of this included student anticipation of how the restructured schools would serve to support racist practices and the sense of frustration that civic involvement might not be able to

curb the power certain leaders had, indicating a more nuanced picture students had of citizenship and voice in the community.

#### *Mode of Representation: Students*

The part of the dissertation that examines the meaning for students is descriptive and comparative, and involves a comparative presentation of the themes from four data areas regarding students' interpretation of various aspects of the curriculum within the restructured schools. Specifically, the meaning associated with the new schools arrangement and curricular changes, resource distribution, and curricular and extra-curricular opportunities were examined. It describes and compares how students interpreted the course of study offerings and delivery of curriculum, including the extent to which they framed curricular inequity as a choice. Themes incorporated the social dynamics of the curriculum, including the intersection of racial, class, and cultural isolation with instructional quality, student understandings of constraints on course offerings, curricular distribution across schools and its ideological underpinnings, the impact of resource distribution on extra-curricular opportunities, student interpretations of the availability of curricular and extra-curricular opportunities, and student perceptions of the impact of district-wide policy on course offerings. Particular attention has been given to (1) differences across schools and (2) differences across student demographic groups. The unfolding of these different aspects of the educational scene are explored, compared, and contrasted.

#### *Mode of Analysis: Secondary Data*

Document analysis was used to triangulate with student data and not as a separate sphere of analysis. Where possible, documents were provided in the data presentation as a way to enrich the student data, especially when interpretations highlighting differences across buildings and sub groups of students were present.

## Subject Positionality

Lincoln (2002) asserted that while positionality is an epistemological concern, far more critical is the post modernist point that any text is still going to be partial and incomplete, as it is socially, culturally, historically, racially and sexually located (p. 333). This requires that texts provide their contextual grounds of argumentation, including an open presentation of the standpoint of the author's social and cultural positions.

As a White researcher who grew up in an all White town entering a 70% Black school system, there would be very obvious differences in cultural histories between myself and the research participants. Aside from difficulties of gaining access to student participants that would be typical for most researchers, there were signifiers that doubtless limited student interest during invitations to the study and most certainly affected the level of trust or honesty in student responses. Although I looked like a faculty member—a White, middle-aged female within the traditions of the overtly feminized profession of teaching—there were other significant markers of difference that exaggerated my outsider status as researcher. I remark on these, as they played an important part in access to and the quality of data I was able to collect, and certainly need to be recognized as limitations to this type of study. Two of the immediate significant characteristics of difference were my speech patterns and the fact that I represented the local university. My northern speech accent would vastly differ from that of the target group of students living and attending school in the Deep South. Furthermore, the prevalence of Black English Vernacular as a linguistic code for students across the district would further distinguish my cultural background as different. Part of this would reflect generational differences, as well, as students had their favored phrases and terms that marked their cohesiveness and inside status as students. Representing the local university would have varying effects of student participants,

though certainly, as one Black board member pointed out to me, every person on the school board who voted to dismantle the desegregated middle and high schools was directly affiliated with said university personally or through a spouse. In some ways, I would carry that representation even though I did not even live in the United States during the times that those school board votes were held. Along with this is the great significance of my race—being a White researcher who is interviewing students in a 70% Black school system that had numerous all Black schools. Undoubtedly, every Black student potentially brought to the interview a lifetime of extended family members’ stories of Jim Crow and racial discrimination in the local context, which certainly would place me as a person not to be trusted (even if the type of research I was conducting might have hinted to students that I cared and was concerned about their educational experiences). The effects of these outsider characteristics had obvious effects that surfaced at times during the interviews. For example, some students thought that I was part of the leadership group who had made the decision to split the schools (as one student accused me, “Why did you all split us up?”). In their understanding, I was now coming in to find out, “How do you like the new schools?” I found myself consciously negotiating how students viewed me during participation presentations and the actual interviews, as I did not want to be marked as racist, something I felt affinity with the leadership would most likely signal. One strategy I quickly learned to employ, for example, was to clarify that I was living in South America when all of the decision-making to create neighborhood schools took place.

At another level, race is often difficult to talk about, and I found students reluctant to even use the words “Black” and “White.” They often hesitated or stammered over which was the correct term to use for this racial construction—White or Caucasian? Talking about racial categories seemed to contradict the stance that race was a social construct, and it was difficult to

avoid using the very terms we felt would only reinscribe its power to distinguish people. I myself would get distracted with this conflict apparent in our conversations, even as I tried to keep the interviews flowing. Many White students overtly avoided any talk of race, and quickly changed the subject when the group approached certain issues. When White students were present, Black students did not relay personal stories of discrimination. There seemed to be more openness or willingness to take risks in interviews where all the participants were Black, and these students tended to have more freedom in telling their stories, but the effects of public disclosure or speaking the deeper issues to a stranger who was White would certainly leave many untold experiences and understandings. While all of these were barriers, perhaps what had more influence was the constraint of time. One group of seniors begged their teacher to let them miss their next class because they had much more to tell me (they were certain the teacher for that class would not mind once she heard the reason for this request). They entreated me to return and a scheduling situation allowed me to meet with them for another time to continue with the half finished protocol. The data might have changed had I had more than one contact with the other participants. Importantly, and something I touched upon regarding the gender barrier of the feminized profession of teaching, the final participant pool was predominately female. Overwhelmingly, Black male students would not participate, which is a great loss of perspective for this study. For example, I attempted to recruit students who were bused to the northern high school by meeting them at their bus stop before school where a friend's daughter caught the bus. This friend knew the bus driver, whose collaboration was requested. The bus driver became an advocate for participation in the study and encouraged the students to return their consent forms. But very soon a backlash surfaced as one male student who got on the bus a few days later responded to the bus driver's reminders about their consent forms. He stood in the aisle and

declared to the students the futility of even participating in the study. As he put it, they all knew very well that they neither belonged at the northern high school nor were wanted—and he reminded them of this. In his words, it was hopeless. But this meant I could not speak with the several Black males who had the potential to offer perspectives on the restructuring that no other group of interviewees could. Though it is hard to know how much my positionality affected the data collection, it is important to note that these distinctions existed and that they, too, framed and affected the data coding and analysis as well as the presentation of the results.

### Representation in Ethnography

George Noblit (2004) has discussed issues of representation in educational ethnography. Importantly, while cultural ethnography is the side of educational ethnography that recognizes the constructivist nature of representing social contexts, it is a common practice to present the ethnographer's work in such a way as to limit the extent to which knowledge claims are made. There are many reasons to consider the parameters of the findings, including the extent to which generalizations can be made. Some of the most obvious ones have to do with participation—this was a very small number of participants (that is, 135) compared to the entire high school population at the time, which was close to 2,800. Another problem is that far more females participated than males (90 verses 45). Finally, but perhaps most significant, was the fact that many blatantly unfair circumstances arose with the restructuring process that would certainly further inscribe a status of less to the students attending the all Black high school, racial division aside. Their new school facility was not completed until after three years of the restructured schools had transpired. It was a much smaller edifice and on a much smaller acreage. The old campus did not have athletic fields for three years while the integrated schools enjoyed state-of-the-art facilities (though during the fall of 2003 the East HS athletes needed to practice elsewhere

while their athletic facility was being completed). The all Black middle school was also four decades old—a gross difference between it and the newer middle schools, and something that might also signal to students that this area of the city did not matter to school leaders as they were assigned to the oldest buildings in the system. Other resources, such as new technology, books, and materials for instruction that came with each new building’s restructuring monies allotted to teachers would not be given to the all Black school until year four of the restructuring. Such stark material differences might not be the case in other school systems that resegregate through restructuring plans. Students at the all Black school in this study, however, were treated differently in obvious material ways that the students would trace back to how leadership and the community regarded the West Side students.

#### *Summary of the Study*

In recognizing the complexities that resulted from the creation of a resegregated school district, this research has been done as a traditional dissertation. It focuses on the meaning the restructuring process has for students. The study consisted of documenting the meaning of resegregation for urban high school students in a partially resegregated school district. In order to elucidate this meaning, data were triangulated in two specific ways. At one level, data were taken from the students whose experiences with the resegregation differed. That is, students of varying backgrounds and grade levels from the three schools were interviewed. These data, in turn, were triangulated in a more complex level with other sources of data. The second source consisted of the documentation of institutional practices related to the school system’s policy to create a small school for the high school placed in the working class all African American neighborhood. Embedded within this structure of discourses is a documentation of the use of the terms “neighborhood schools,” “community schools,” and “small schools,” as arguments to

justify a process that resegregated the system. It was these arguments that framed the restructuring in ways that naturalized the process as reflective of individual choice of housing, thus removing any political nature of the context. This is important, as these positions were frequently placed in the public narrative and continue to be a part of the understanding by some stakeholders for why neighborhood schools were created the way they were for this system.

Given the national trend towards increased school resegregation, this topic is important to examine because research demonstrates that the problems resegregated neighborhood schools purport to solve are not solved, and are often exacerbated (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). This raises the question, what happens in schools within school systems and districts where restructuring leads to greater class and race segregation? This study looked at one facet of this dynamic—the way some of the stakeholders interpret the significance of the changes and how those interpretations in turn become a part of the change process.

The purpose of this study, then, was to document the meaning resegregation has for high school students currently experiencing these complex social forces at work throughout the process of one school system's restructuring. It does not attempt to prove whether the beliefs they have are true or false, for even false beliefs have real consequences. Rather, it has documented the meaning of the restructuring for students because this has important consequences for their lives and experiences in schools and beyond. This was done by examining how these students interpreted the changes taking place throughout the restructuring process. This was accomplished by identifying the factors that seemed to differentiate students' interpretations, examining commentary and school practices surrounding these factors, and analyzing how these were related to students' understanding of how others viewed themselves as students and as citizens.



## Structure of the Rest of the Dissertation

Chapter 4, which follows, presents the student data with a discussion on four major data areas. Each data area is closed with a summary and commentary on the types of assumptions that seemed to be influencing the student participants' responses. Chapter 5 provides a cross-case analysis, where the findings are gathered across the schools for each of the four data areas and are summarized, with special attention given to how the responses from students assigned to the all Black school stood out. Chapter 6 then closes the dissertation with a discussion on the study's implications and conclusions.

## CHAPTER 4

### STUDENT VOICES

The former West High School, established across two campuses, had been the ultimate destination of every student in the city school system. Its central location had drawn students from every part of the city, and everyone—at least in theory—had a chance to be a part of its curricular and extracurricular opportunities regardless of background or residence. School leaders and teachers often remarked that attaining this degree of desegregation at the building level did not mean the system had achieved true integration within the classroom; admittedly, in their words, it had not. However, by virtue of being in the same building, students did have access to a racially integrated environment and at least formal access to the same curriculum. In the new arrangement, neither of these would be true.

At some level, the high school restructuring involved nothing new for the district. In the years preceding the high school split, the middle schools had already been restructured in similar ways. However, the degree to which the enrollment distributions of the middle schools' attendance zones were segregated escaped serious public scrutiny as long as the destination of one common high school remained.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the level of public conversation about the restructuring of Rivertown public schools rose dramatically with the restructuring of the high schools. The division of the high schools drew attention to the demographic features of student enrollment distributions—namely, race, class, and region—in a way that structuring at the previous levels

did not. This public discussion included the students who were being affected by the restructuring. High school students in particular were concerned and vocal (Schmitke, 2005) about which students were assigned to each high school. Students interviewed for this study expressed concern primarily about three kinds of demographic differences in the school populations—regional, class, and racial. Their interpretations of the significance of these differences were not just a repetition of observations heard from adult community members, though often students mentioned interpretations from parents, politicians, neighbors, and other adults about the restructuring. Students, much more than the non-educator adults in the community, faced the stark fact of the demographic differences between the schools. They talked to their friends at other schools, and they saw each other at athletic events and other district wide-school competitions, so comparisons of the three high schools were frequent and inevitable in student conversations.

As with adults in the community, students commented on the most obvious characteristics correlated with enrollment differences—race, neighborhoods, and to a lesser extent income level. Reflection on these characteristics prompted discussion at a much deeper level as students asked why they were separated in this manner, leading students to speculate about the purpose for the restructuring. Students took note of how they were now divided across the city and arrived at their own interpretations of a hierarchical arrangement between the newly created schools, though this also influenced their sense of possibility for their schools and for themselves.

This chapter presents the student meaning of the restructuring; it examines the various ways the students experienced the high schools two and a half to three years into the restructuring. It provides a picture of how students across the city viewed the dismantling of the

former comprehensive West High and its replacement by three neighborhood high schools. It pays particular attention to the ways in which the student interpretations compared and contrasted across a host of issues, many of which even if not structurally tied to geographic region, race, and class, became interpreted through these lenses as they read the social text of the restructuring.

Despite repeated public insistence by system officials that there was equality across the three schools, this message was largely contradicted for students by the social text they were living. Students found the geographic characteristics of the zoning, the race and class demographics across the schools, differences in the size and timeline for building the new physical plant for the third high school, the size of the new West high school, comments made by students at other schools, the reluctance of parents from other schools to send their children to West HS, a narrowing of curricular options at West HS, and many of their personal experiences, all contradicted the district's message of equality.

This chapter details an important meaning implicit and explicit across student responses—the understanding students had that the arrangement produced a hierarchy of schools that were unequal. It documents how features of the restructuring were interpreted by students through already existing lenses provided by a local and national history of institutionalized and internalized racism and classism. Despite the obvious structural inequalities working against students assigned to the new all Black school—West High—this study shows how the resulting differences in academic and other forms of educational performance became interpreted as consequences of deficits in the West students themselves—e.g., West students being “less” than others, as lacking motivation or ability, or as lacking community and cultural values that support learning. This interpretation, in turn, became a social fact with which West High students were

forced to contend. Either they accepted the interpretation and consequently lowered their expectations for themselves or they resisted this portrayal of them as less-than, but then spent significant social and psychological effort fending off this negative portrayal. This chapter ultimately makes the argument that the structural inequality of the school, combined with the ubiquitous message that the students and community served by West High were somehow less than other students and communities in the system, influenced West High School students' experiences in ways that made equality impossible to attain within the restructuring plan.

### Overview of Student Reactions

The following is presented to provide the reader with a sense of what the restructuring looked like from the perspective of a student. As students responded to questions about the restructuring, many features stood out for the changes they witnessed. At the time of the interviewing only the seniors had directly experienced the desegregated high school at the old West's western campus (consisting of grades 9 and 10), though underclassmen recalled their perceptions of the unified West from stories passed on to them by older siblings, other relatives, or friends who had attended that icon. This type of information formed the basis from which students compared the former and newer arrangements. These comparisons often included the idea that resources from the unified West now had to be split three ways. Students also made comparisons between the three new high schools based on their current experiences, including conversations with those who attended the other schools, and in light of ongoing reports from media sources within the community.

Several aspects of the change that elicited strong or frequent responses from students are briefly presented here to provide a sketch of what the restructuring looked like from the point of view of a high school student. Students commented on quite a range of issues that were arguably

a consequence of the school restructuring. A noticeable difference was, of course, the new buildings in new locations that had replaced the old West arrangement. Students commented on a number of perceived inequities in these new facilities. Often more interesting were students' discussions about the reasons for constructing the new buildings; if the new buildings were necessary to alleviate overcrowding at the old West High's East and West campuses—which many assumed, then it appeared to students that something had gone wrong because classes were still overcrowded. Students in the two new schools pointed out that enrollment numbers from upcoming middle school groups indicated this would increase. Students also questioned whether the new zoning arrangement saved energy overall in transportation, a rationale they had heard for the restructuring. Unable to find believable economic rationales for the restructuring, students frequently looked at the demography and location of the schools to explain the new arrangement. Viewed in this way, the distinctive class and race profiles of the schools along with their regions and the consequent school identities and reputations they precipitated seemed intentionally imposed on students. Student speculation about the motivations for this led them inevitably and often reluctantly to the conclusion that many leaders in the community had lowered expectations and less care for African American students generally and West-side community students in particular.

These conversations about the motivations of policymakers refracted into student reflections of their neighbors' and fellow students' attitudes towards one another. There was some confusion about the extent to which students and parents could select a school to attend. At times, enrollment patterns were viewed more as an outcome of school choice rather than the system's policy, which led students to project motivations for these decisions onto students and parents no longer at West. The issues of safety and discipline were frequently mentioned in

these discussions, including the perception by some that the new West High, with its nearly all-Black population, was not considered safe.

Students expressed concern about the way the media represented the new West High and the West Side generally. Many students saw racial bias and other forms of prejudice in those representations, and suspected that this was intentionally done to portray each school in a certain fashion to achieve targeted ends through partnership with local leaders. These allegedly biased media representations often involved reportage on disciplinary events. It also involved reportage, or lack thereof, on the accomplishments of students in the many programs visible to the community. Students at the new West High were acutely aware that the difficulty they faced recruiting enough students for AP classes and extracurricular activities could be attributed to the smaller size of their school. North HS and East HS students seemed unaware of the great enrollment size discrepancy between their schools and that of West apart from their divisional athletic status. Most media representations failed to mention this underlying fact, implying that the lack of advanced and extracurricular options at West HS was the consequence of lack of student interest or ability.

### *Bad Black Kids*

The important point to note for the purposes of this study is that all of these features of the restructuring were interpreted by students as being linked to the racial and local region demographics. For most students across the system, but especially for West HS students, these changes appeared to be driven by an impression that the new West HS was attended by “bad Black kids” and was a place people wished to avoid if possible. In other words, the demography of the restructuring served to reinscribe latent white supremacist discourses that framed certain students as operating from either personal or social deficits. West HS students either

internalized or resisted these discourses—usually both. But even in their resistance, they faced the burdensome task of working against the grain of what felt like an unjust educational context.

Student interviews revealed that students' experience of the restructuring was more complicated than just a passive response to the various structural features of the school reorganization. Their interpretations played a part in the ongoing constitution of those changes. For example, the perception that the curriculum was better elsewhere—possibly a carry-over from published middle school composite test score results, but most certainly from community discourses students had heard—led academically ambitious students to try to move to other schools. This lowered the number of students who could enroll in AP and IB courses at West HS, making it less likely such courses would be offered. Lower enrollments limited the academic offerings as well as some very visible extracurricular programs, thus reinforcing the already limited offerings caused by the smaller size of the school. This set up a vicious cycle of perceived low performance and low expectations.

Similarly, many students attributed its lower enrollments to an exodus of students preferring to attend a newer building. This led some to believe that once their building was completed those students would transfer back, restoring the quality of education at West HS to some degree. To hasten this outcome, students staged a walkout to end excessive delays of the construction of the new school building. This walkout, however, had the unintended consequence of further marking the West HS students as “bad” in the eyes of the other school communities. It was read by some students at North HS and East HS as evidence that commentary of disciplinary problems at West HS was true, making it less likely that good students would choose to return to the newly built West HS.



At almost every turn, students at the new West High saw evidence that some in the city viewed them and their neighborhood as less smart, less capable, less hardworking, generally worth avoiding. When they made efforts to counter this perception, the cultural discourses that marginalized them—whether structured around race, class, or geography—conspired to make those efforts work against them. Students’ read in this regard was, I offer, for the most part accurate. They knew this. It contributed to a growing sense of frustration and fatalism about the future of West High and its students. This frustration and fear for the future among West HS students was one of the outcomes of the restructuring process, one that was clearly detrimental to students’ well being and academic possibilities.

In what follows I provide more detailed documentation and analysis of these outcomes. For purposes of organization, the student responses have been divided into four broad data areas: (1) racial demography, (2) resources, (3) image of the schools, and (4) curricular features. Each of these data areas was divided into two or more sub-areas. This was necessary to accommodate the complex ways students talked about characteristics of the new schools. Each sub-area has been identified at the beginning of its corresponding broad data area and described within its own section. Importantly, topics often bled into others, making it difficult to maintain discreet separate data areas. While some of the data has a slight redundancy and overlap, focus was given on the specific points students were making while retaining some of the referents to further illustrate the complex ways in which they made meaning of the restructuring.

One technical point must be made to help the reader. Since the voices of over seventy students have been woven into the data presentation, the participants have been identified by school (W for West, N for North, and E for East), by number in order of entering the chapter for a given high school, as male (M) or female (F), and by grade level: freshman (Fr), sophomore

(So), junior (Jr), and senior (Sr). This was done to help reflect the variety of student experiences, especially those of seniors who had attended the former big West campus and freshmen at West who had never attended school with nonblack students.

### Racial Demography

The first main data area of the study is the meaning of the racial demography of the schools, as it was the most obvious change from the former high school to the newer arrangement. Students from all three schools frequently mentioned the demographic patterns of the schools, though this was most significant for West students, as it related to so many other dimensions of inequity they saw and experienced in the restructuring. This change in the high school structure generated discussions as to the fairness of the building assignments, which were now distinguished by race, class, and region. Though students talked about all three characteristics to varying degrees, many were especially sensitive to the overt racial separation of students. The creation of an all Black school after ending twenty-five years of a model secondary level desegregation plan (initiated in 1978) was a potent signifier of racial separation—a direction towards which students believed the system was moving. Such demarcation invariably led them to speculate how zone lines would change once the new West was built since it was located in the middle of the North High attendance zone. If it had been all right to create an all Black school, would it then be right to remove Black students from the Whitest high school and make the all Black school “more Black”? Students discussed two main features of the racial demographics, which have been placed into the following subareas: (1) student observations of and reactions to the creation of an all Black school and (2) student assessments of the racial demographics of the schools based upon their projections of the pending rezoning. While the latter reinforced the notion that the restructuring was racially

motivated while appearing to be natural, the former was a strong signifier to West students that West Side Black students had to be removed from the other two schools and therefore were regarded as “less.”

### *Demographics and Difference*

In this first subarea of the data, students reacted to an obvious fact of the restructuring—the creation of an all Black school. Students’ understanding of the restructuring was neither superficial nor did it emerge only after the fact of being divided into smaller and distinct peer groups. Adults in the community frequently dismissed student reaction to the restructuring, suggesting that students were just reacting to features important to adolescents—such features as the loss of a tradition of athletic dominance of the giant West High. It was often asserted by school leaders, and even by a few administrators and teachers that students would eventually get used to these changes as they built up their own school’s traditions. Students would miss friends who now attended other schools, but they would make new friends.

Students, in fact, had been living a racial division through the 1999 restructuring of the system’s middle schools. This experience could not be erased from the minds of many students as they tried to make sense of this more recent division of the high school. Student understanding of the most striking features of the new arrangement, such as the creation of a 100% African-American school on the West Side was informed by conversations about the restructuring of schools that had been happening for years in the district and by the long history of racial politics and civil rights struggle in the region. Seniors in particular had vivid recall of the process of racially dividing the middle schools, and drew on this experience to argue that the racial division had been a calculated plan that took place gradually, but steadily over time. To them, the high school split was no different:

W1FSr: And to me it just didn't start in high school. This goes back to when they decided to split the middle schools up. To me, this is where it traces back to. Because-- they are our feeder schools and you can look and tell when they split the middle schools up, you just

W2MSr: [joins in almost simultaneously] You knew how it was going.

W1FSr: You knew how it was going to go when they split the high schools up. So it's, to me, it's like—basically the same. It's like, it started. This wasn't something that just happened in the high schools. It happened in the middle schools also.

These students had been racially separated with the middle school split, making it hard for them to view the high school split as something separate. To them, this was synonymous with the middle school restructuring, which now extended into high school. Discussion triggered thoughts these seniors recalled having during the decision-making process of whether to adopt the recent racial division of the middle schools for the high school level. Racial division had to have been the motive, they argued, because school leaders knew in advance what each school would “have” demographically:

W3FSr: We already knew when we got a middle school, by the time we hit between the seventh and eighth grade, they were already debating on splitting the high schools up. So when they're already debating about splitting the high schools up, right then and there you know there's some other stuff going on. I don't care—under the table, over the table—wherever. They was going to have--they was setting up what each high school was going to HAVE [emphasizes “have”]. You figured that out. You knew where each school—you just basically knew, when they split up, you can see. You can just see it, because they decided right then and there. They was like, “Okay,” you know, “This has

this—”. They already—to me when they decided to split, they knew the demographics of the school and what the school was going to have.

Students drew on their experiences with the system’s earlier restructuring. They had been racially separated in the newly configured middle schools for one year when school leaders voted to implement the exact structure for the high school. This student called into question the moral integrity of a leadership that condoned the decision to create an all Black high school, stating that leaders had to have known what each new high school’s demographic profile would be. District claims that the restructuring had nothing to do with race were not credible.

Many West HS students indicated that the demographic configuration of each school was by no means accidental and that it had been an intentional part of the restructuring plan; leaders were fully cognizant of what each school’s racial make-up would be before the schools were even created. Importantly, most of these seniors had attended the all Black middle school that was approved as they prepared to leave fifth grade—an experience some referred back to as they made sense of the newest structural change. As fifth graders, they knew their new middle school would be all Black before it ever opened, inferring that school leaders certainly would have known in advance that this would be true of the new western high school.

When peers argued that the restructuring was motivated by people wanting to divide the schools by race and by class, one West High senior explained her reluctance to accept this, stating that she never wanted to use race as an excuse for her own limitations:

W3FSr: It looks like that, but you hate to say it. But you don’t want us to think that your race is holding you back because I never ever want to think that. ‘Cause in life I believe I want to achieve regardless where—race, where school, wherever I go to. But they make it seem like, it’s just like—it makes it a more racial issue because they knew when they

split up, they knew. It's like you knew the demographics [places hands before her face] of your city. If you know the demographics of your city, you automatically know, "Well, the schools will be equally split." No they won't! If you look at the race—and the financial areas of it, it's not making sense. It doesn't make sense. And that's what you hate to say. It seems like a racial issue. But it's a racial—it's like a racial and more of a financial and demographic—it's like a demographics thing.

W2MSr: [cuts in] Socioeconomic.

W3FSr: Yeah.

It was difficult for these seniors to get around the differences of the demographic composition of the schools, though the above statements illustrate the resiliency of some students as they faced a barrier to a better quality of education. Zoning patterns reflected such an obvious sorting of students by race and class into specific schools across the three regions that for them this type of division had to have been apparent to anyone living in the city, including (or especially) school leaders, contradicting leadership promises of equality and fairness. Still, pointing out the obvious could easily be interpreted as relying on race as a scapegoat—something several students stated they would not do and would just work harder to overcome. This student picked up on the insistence of equality of the schools often stated by school leaders, though refuted this statement with the fact of the actual demographic make-up of the schools. They were not in any way equal, as the demographic composition attested to, so could not be expected to offer equal programs.

At times, observations by students did not directly point out demographic differences, though in a global sense brought them to bear as they assessed the restructuring. For example, one group of seniors considered the overcrowding at their school that they expected would

worsen with even larger influxes of middle school students. They believed this was a problem that needed more attention. As they discussed this among themselves, one student brought up the topic of zoning, as zone evasions could help explain the overcrowding at their school:

N1MSr: There's already zoning problems, but we just need to zone, you know, and have some kind of standard to it so that you don't have these kids that go here that aren't supposed to go here or that don't go here that are supposed to go here, or--you know? That kind of thing. I think they should be a lot more strict with where you live.

N2FSr: I thought they did that to make all of the schools, like, racially equal.

N1MSr: I'm not sure.

N3FSr: Me neither. How's our school?

N1MSr: We're 50/50, East HS is 50/50. It's just West that's somehow all Black.

N4MSr: But they're doing the zoning over, though. Since the new West is being built, they have to—they say they're doing the zoning over. So a lot of Black people are going to be gone from North High.

Prior to this exchange the students had commented on their overcrowded feeder middle school and the impact this was having on class sizes as increasingly larger grades replaced smaller ones that graduated. One student suggested that problems with zone evasions required stricter enforcement to help resolve their overcrowding. Absent was any expression of why a student might want to avoid a certain school, especially to attend their school, which was the Whitest and wealthiest of the three. Aware of difference in the racial demographics of the schools, they did not discuss its significance beyond a natural outcome of the zone lines they believed would help guard against overcrowding.

This student analysis provides an example of how some students drew on demographic information as they assessed their experiences in the new schools. For most students, the zoning process was a mystery. For these White students, however, it meant an objective way to handle numbers of students. Students did not understand the problems involved with using zone lines for the middle and high schools that were originally designed to attain unitary status through desegregating what would have been predominately White elementary schools. Something these students did notice though they did not understand was that the zoning had created an all Black school. And by the looks of the direction the restructuring was taking, as one student pointed out, more Blacks would most likely be zoned out of their school and sent over to the all Black school—also something none of these students questioned. This insight is important because the student who reported the expected rezoning lived in the South end of the city closer to the new West HS, though he knew the impending rezoning would not zone White students like him out of North HS and into the all Black school. True, many Black students lived much closer to West, but they also lived closer to North HS than he did, and yet they would be zoned out—he would not. In this he turned out to have been correct.<sup>15</sup> Though it made sense to zone these students to West HS, it did not make sense to continue to zone students like him to North HS.

North HS White students were sensitive to the racial division that designated their school as “White” and often refuted this misnomer when community impressions surfaced or when students made references to North High’s Whiteness in the interviews:

N5MSr: What were the ratios at [the former] West? It was still pretty startling—

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<sup>15</sup> See *The Tuscaloosa News* articles published May 4, 2007, by Antwanette Jones, and September 30, 2007, by Lydia Seabol Avant. On May 3, 2007, the School Board voted to approve the rezoning, a move that shifted approximately 880 Black students from schools Whites attended. In the fall of 2007, about 300 of these students were moved from performing schools and were reassigned to all Black schools in the western region that were underperforming, based on criteria for NCLB.



like 75-25 I think was what it was? Like, Black was 75, White was 20, and then “other” was 5, so it still was very predominantly Black when we went to [the former] West. . . . But, I remember when we first got to North High, White was in the majority or as close to it--

N6FSr: And now Black is the majority.

N5MSr: Black is the majority now here too.

Technically, their school was not the “White” school as it was so often referred by community members and peers. “We’re not even in the majority,” as another student put it. News reportage, which students followed, indicated their school had dropped slightly below the 50% mark for White enrollment, allowing them to justify their stance. This did not explain how a 70% Black system could have a school this White. Conversely, West HS students were sensitive to race in different ways, perhaps because all the evidence they could bring to bear on the division indicated that West Side students were the ones leaders had felt the need to separate out from the other students.

### *An All Black School*

Like the child participants in Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s research (see Kluger, 1977), West students internalized racism as a result of the condoned practices of a type of segregation allowable under the newly restructured high school. Students made attempts to understand the reasoning behind a division that had created an all Black school. West HS students knew and stated that segregation is illegal, about which they were correct—*de jure* racial segregation no longer exists. This did not stop many from thinking that race could have been a motivating drive of the new arrangement, however. Even still, when the line of reasoning approached racial segregation, a few students wanted to deny that race had been the motivation for separating

White and Black students by building. As one West senior reacted, “I don’t want to think that it was race—that would be too terrible!” Another West senior brought up the fact that school leaders had denied this was the motive for the restructuring, so seemed more open to consider that view:

W4FSr: Some people think they did just to split up the races—like send all the Black people over there, all the White people to the new schools. But—that might be a reason. It might not be. ‘Cause the school board said that was not a reason.

This response illustrates the awareness students had as they followed public debates surrounding the creation of the all Black school. With the exception of a few White students, only Black students attended their school while many White students attended the other two schools. West HS students frequently brought up the motives of a leadership that would condone a racial separation of the students.

The students would not have known the term *de facto* segregation, though this was an obvious feature of the student assignments to the new schools, which they frequently did point out. As students considered the enrollment patterns, it was hard for many to deny that the split had not been motivated at least in part by race. How else could they explain that one school was all Black and might become “one big Black school” if their projections of the rezoning were true?

That there was denial from a few students about an intentional racial split did not eliminate the doubts many felt as they experienced a school distinguished from the others by its racial isolation. One West HS senior struggled with this during the initial part of the focus group interview as she thought about why the high school had been restructured, W5FSr: “I thought that the reason that they wanted to split up the schools was because they thought it would bring a

larger population, but I really feel like they did it to split up Black and White kids.” This student considered the leadership justifications of attracting people from county and private schools, which had been published in the local newspaper. But experiencing the racial division over time made her sense that perhaps there were explicit racial motives. Sensing that the racial division seemed more than a coincidence, she continued: W5FSr: “I feel like they wanted to separate Black and White kids. And they didn’t really—if you think about it, they really didn’t do it. But then again, as I think about it, they did.” Her struggle with intention reflected accounting for the *de facto* segregated housing patterns. This was not exactly intentional if people lived in certain sections of the city and attended neighborhood schools, yet students were also bussed to integrate North High. She finally reasoned that people could get away with separating out Black students if this was done gradually and by someone who had power. The all Black middle school was voted on when she was in fifth grade. The all Black West high school came next. Rezoning would most likely send more Blacks back to West. The division seemed more than just a natural outcome:

W5FSr: I don’t want to say, “Since this is the South,” ‘cause I don’t want to put it like that, but I feel like that’s one reason. It’s probably not the main, but I feel like that’s what they’re working towards. Because, like even though, like all of that is over and people say that racism is not in the South and stuff anymore, it really is—if you think about it. People just don’t pay attention to it because, you know, you don’t have slaves and things like that. It’s not really all about that. It’s about how they discriminate against different people. And I feel like since a lot of people that’s in the system are White—not all of them, but a lot of them are—I feel like, you know, some of them are racist and things. Like, that they know that they have control in the say-so over—you

know . . . “Well, we can split them up.” You know. “We have the say-so in the schools, so we’ll just try and do it.” And I feel like they’re doing it slowly. And people don’t want to recognize that. They think it’s just the—you know, “Expand Rivertown.” I don’t think it’s all about that—‘cause you could expand it in another way.

She referenced the historical legacy of racism in the South, and how political control allowed institutional practices of racial discrimination, such as separating the Black students from White in the local schools. This student also was familiar with the city leaders’ plans for growing the city often presented in the local newspaper. Yet the outcome of the restructuring made it seem that the stated goal of city growth was used as a cover to attain a separation desired by racist individuals. The intention of Whites with political power was to separate the White and Black students as an end in itself, which she reluctantly attributed to deep-rooted Southern traditions of racism and discrimination that continued to this day. She did not see that the racial division could be a means for city growth as it attracted people to certain sections of the city by making some schools Whiter. Still, she noted stealth with a gradual process of racial division that seemed to take a natural course over time—an idea echoed in other West HS interviews. She and other students ventured to propose that more separation would take place with the expected rezoning once the new West High building was completed, which will be examined in the next sub-area of data. Important here is the belief this was the target goal—an intentional racial separation that was done gradually to render any accusations of racism unfounded.

Not all students provided an analysis like the above student, but many, as the following response demonstrates, did believe it was motivated by a desire to separate Black and White students:

W6FSr: I believe the restructuring took place basically to separate everybody—because if the—whoever was over the meetings on the board didn't feel that we should be separated then it would only be one high school—as West still. So I believe the whole plan was just to separate everybody.

Even if students did not provide detailed analyses of how and why they thought the restructuring was done, they still sensed there were intentions of a separation:

W7FSr: But looking at the way the schools are positioned and where they're being located, it's kind of hard not to think that—that it's to segregate the schools. But—and then I've heard a lot of people say that it's for the development of the community—for the communities.

The idea of land development seemed a credible way to locate schools. Still, she reluctantly admitted that the building locations also made it look like the racial divide was intended by leaders.

### *Separation and Segregation*

Students tended to use the word “separated” as they discussed the demographics of the schools, while a few chose to label it as “segregation.” At times, they used the terms interchangeably to describe the enrollment patterns:

W8FJr: If you really want to know, we say it's a--they try to get Whites on one side and Blacks on one side. That's really what they're trying to do.

W9FJr: It seems like we're going back to segregation.

W10FJr: They're trying to keep the Blacks on their side of town—OUR side. I think that's how it is. I mean, I just think they're trying to separate everybody.

W8FJr: What you're saying is the same thing—segregating keeps people on their own side of town. She's just using different words.

They recognized the *de facto* housing segregation patterns by region, yet argued that if children were sent to separate schools by race it was because Black children were not welcome in White sections of the city—thus the efforts to keep them “on their side of town.” Students often felt this division was intentional. Though segregated housing patterns can make racially separate neighborhood-based schools appear to be a natural outcome, leaders' knowledge of these housing patterns meant the separation had racial division as its goal—separating out the West Side Black students. To students, the policy was by no means innocent. Because the idea of intention kept coming up, I asked who they believed wanted the racial division:

W11FJr: Parents.

W8FJr: City Board.

W10FJr: City Board. Parents.

W8FJr: I took [a technical course] my ninth grade year and like, you know, they have East High, West High, and North High classes over there. And like, the ones I talked to . . . , [quotes peers] “I didn't want the schools to split up.” They didn't like the school splitting up. So—it's really not the students. It's the City Board. It's the parents. So that's the way it is.

Many students attributed the new school arrangement to White parents who had the power and influence to divide the students. The technical school served all three high schools and from conversations with peers across the city they knew that students had not been in favor of the high school split. Students who broached this topic unfailingly attributed the split to

White parents—usually wealthy ones—who did not want their children attending school with Black children.

Whether this was segregation was not the major point for participants. Many highlighted what it meant to be racially marginalized, and more specifically, to be considered “less,” as one senior explained in an individual interview:

W5FSr: Personally, how I feel and a lot of my friends that are Black that go here—they feel like, “All right, well since y’all are trying to separate Black and White—like y’all trying to say that, you know, we’re not good enough to be around White kids.” The West Side isn’t good enough for White kids to go to our schools. You know, it kind of make us feel low, even though we know we’re not, but if you being realistic, it do hurt people’s feelings. And I don’t think a lot of people in the system thought about that when they did it. They just did it and thought nobody would pay attention. But, you know, we’re smarter than what they give us credit for. I actually felt kind of bad because it did make—it did make me feel like, you know, “Well, they don’t want White kids to be over here with us.” What are they trying to say? The people on the West Side and that go to that school are not good enough to be around your White children?

The stark racial separation of an all Black school meant that White parents did not want the West Side Blacks with their children. It was painful to face, as this marked them as the students who were less—the ones “not good enough” to attend schools with White peers. The division, in effect, meant the West students were deemed as lower.

Further proof students provided about an intentional racial division was that Blacks could be bused to the northern and eastern schools but no White children were bused to any schools on the western side of the city:

W12FJr: They bus kids from North every—for a whole semester to come for two periods [to take Pre IB classes]. So they can bus kids over here for an entire day of school.

Because like—I don't understand the zoning lines. It's kids that live like—right across the road, right up here. They go to North High. But they have the Black kids over here zoned for North, but why aren't the White kids over there zoned for West? That's what I don't understand.

Students could easily see through the rhetoric and doubted that arguments promoting the restructuring were genuine.

Some students used the term “segregation,” which helped them highlight the nature of the racial division brought on by the restructuring. This was not legally the case of the school system, which the students were clearly able to distinguish and often did. In their reasoning, regardless of what people called this there was a clear demarcation of better and less that was understood by the act of racially separating students. So what did one call this? Possibly more important to the West HS students was the meaning of a racial division that unequivocally portrayed them and by their association with it, the West Side community, as “less.”

Students understood the meaning of the term segregation and knew this had not happened because it is illegal. One West senior, for example, mentioned a conversation his older sister had with co-workers about the impending rezoning and how the school system would return to segregation, W13MSr: “[S]he said to me that they're going to try to go back to segregating and all that . . . . If it happens—the people that started it—they will have to pay for it--somehow.” He clearly knew this was not segregation and if it ever did take place, there would be legal repercussions. Other students made the distinction that segregation was not the case of West.



One student was emphatic, W7FSr: “We don’t even need to discuss it because they won’t do that. That can’t happen.”

Students knew segregation was illegal and stated so. Still, this term surfaced in unlikely moments. For example, a question about what the future new West would be like triggered this comment, W14MFr: “Well, I still think it going to be equal because—they can’t segregate us. You know. They can’t—they can’t do like they did back in the days. It ain’t going down like that.” The racial division was foremost in his thoughts as he responded to a question about how he envisioned his new school once they entered the new West HS building. In all of the above responses, students trusted that legal recourse would protect their school and educational experiences from race-based discriminatory action, yet sensed unfairness at the racial separation that marked them as the students with whom no one wanted to attend school.

A strong symbolic influence on West students’ views of the division was the fact that Whites were allowed to attend West High. Even if zone lines did not include many Whites, they *could* attend West if they so chose. Evidence students usually offered was the number of Whites actually enrolled at West during the year of the interviews—three. Yes, Whites could attend their school, but the fact that so few came meant something, as did the reality that only one was zoned for West. Students knew that zone lines ultimately were approved of by school leadership even if they did not know how the process of drawing lines took place. Still, the racial divide was clearly read by West students as a racial text. One senior analyzed the racial separation this way:

W4FSr: It’s going to be like, the kids are going to think like they did that just because they’re Black—that they’re going to put them in one school because they don’t want them interacting with the White kids I guess. And I don’t understand why they’re going

to do the school like this because you might as well say this school is all Black because we only have, like, three White kids—like two of them come for the IB program.

This was not *de jure* segregation. It was a condoned separation, however, and if leadership had created such an unbalance through zone lines they had approved, that meant something.

According to this student, the restructuring created the sense that Whites did not want their children attending school with Black children, which was wrong. This response gives pause as to how Black children would interpret such an arrangement, even one that was legally allowable.

Many student participants expressed confusion over the split and wondered how the school restructuring could be considered fair. Students could not understand the legality of the separatism; creating an all Black high school did not make sense to them and did not seem like it should be allowed. While students often adhered to the legal sense of the term “segregation,” most West HS students felt the racial division through the building assignment policy was unfair because of how it portrayed them and their community. In every analysis they gave, it meant they were regarded as less and inferior.

The West HS students were noticeably disturbed by such explicit separation from other children and could not readily dismiss it, as the following responses illustrate:

W1Teacher: What would you tell them to do to make West HS better?

W15MFr: [quietly] Not sep—not separating Black people from White people.

W16FFr: [calls from across the room] I really want to know, why did they split the schools up? . . . We Black, they White!

W17FFr: [cuts in to clarify] Because some people, you know, the White people—um—parents—um probably don’t want them around us because we—you know how some

Whites be like—don't like Black people because of racism and stuff like that. That's probably why.

In response to this allegation, the classroom teacher then asked if there had been racism among students with the integrated school, suggesting cause for people wanting the division. In response, one student suggested: W17FFr: "No, it's just the parents." When asked how this could be corrected, another student replied:

W14MFr: [softly] By making it equal. By putting all—like, I think all races should be together—because we all like children of God. Like, we should work together, learn together. All that kind of stuff right there. That why Martin Luther King—people like him who fought for us and—so that all of us could be together. Put our—[lifts hand] my Black hand with his [lifts other hand] White hand—and [clasps hands] we'd be together.

To students, the creation of an all Black school clearly was not *de jure* segregation but it also meant the new schools were not equal despite school leadership rhetoric of equality. As this freshman pointed out, Martin Luther King Jr. had sought an equality that removed racial barriers in social institutions. For the schools to be equal, at the very least, they believed it required that Black and White students attended school together. There should not have been a hierarchy of groups, which they now sensed was in place due to building distinctions by race, class, and region, though for the marginalized students, this stood out primarily by race. The most prominent efforts of Martin Luther King Jr. came years after the *Brown* decision had abolished *de jure* segregated schools, so this was an appropriate parallel to draw with the restructuring's contradiction. He was not talking about changing a law-sanctioned segregation but changing a type of condoned racial separation that continued to pervade our social institutions, including the city's schools.

These comments all provide a sense of the extent to which West HS students understood the racial division of the school enrollments. If West HS students were conscientious of the enrollment division by race and discussed it at great length, it should come as no surprise that many students who were not separated in this manner did not discuss it or barely brought it up.

Most North HS White participants never discussed the racial separation of the students, though as presented earlier, one North student understood that the zone lines<sup>16</sup> had been created to ensure racial equity. Most notably, their conversations remained race-neutral except to emphasize that Whites were no longer the majority at their school. Several expressed great disapproval of the restructuring, but this was the closest they came to discussing the split in terms of race. One student expressed shame, as it reflected badly on the state to undo the desegregated high school so quickly after coming out from the court order:

N5MSr: First of all, I don't see why they felt such a big need for change. And also I thought it was—it would have been so much better if they had kept it as West. It would have showed that Alabama wasn't so quick to split back up. If they had actually stayed in the mega high school for even just like ten more years, it would have shown that we don't care if we have an order—you know—"We've done this, we like it, we'll keep doing it." But instead, as soon as we got out of the court order they split again. So that just kind of represented us badly, too.

To him, it looked too much like only a court order could make the city system comply with having a desegregated high school in this Southern state. The injustice these North HS students

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<sup>16</sup> In this, she was correct. The zone lines the high schools followed had originally been created to attain a level of racial balance in the elementary schools so the system could receive the grant of unitary status. But this one way busing of elementary students out of the West region was not an issue for the middle and high schools when everyone attended them under the desegregation plan.

more acutely felt was that they, along with most students they knew, had opposed the split of the former West High and were not listened to. They complained that now they and everyone missed out on well established programs offered by the former big high school. Still, while White students lamented this loss, they would never be considered “less” as the new schools generated comparisons by community members.

East HS students often discussed the restructuring in terms of separation, though for them this also included separation by socioeconomic status. They proudly referred to themselves as the ideal mix, stating that their school was characterized by a spectrum of class- and race-based diversity where, for the most part everyone was accepted. Several East HS juniors and seniors who were either White or self-identified as bi-racial attributed the restructuring to racist practices in the South, especially for their state and specifically for their city. One student observed that this division of the old West would result in greater extremes of *de facto* segregation across the city, which the school enrollments would reflect but also drive:

E1MSr: What [Name] was saying on how—how they made this so that they could get away from Black people—the way they made the zones, I personally think that it’s more segregated now than it’s ever been and hopefully it’ll never be this bad again because . . . in a couple of years, the way that it’s looking like, East’s going to be pretty much all Black and then so is West. And then North is going to end up being all White . . . . And that’s just segregating the whole city—the whole town—more than it already is. And it’s bad enough since we live in Alabama and that’s how it is. That’s how it’s always been down here. And it needs to change sometime—at least shortly.

This student’s analysis pointed to the *de facto* segregation from housing patterns the schools would likely mirror. This was not just a school problem but one that divided the entire city along

a color line, which he decried. Regional racist traditions and practices operated, though he did not accept these as excuses. For him, the schools reinforced and intensified city-wide racial segregation that would eventually lead Whites to abandon the East High school zone. The high school attendance zones would drive this division.

Another East HS junior, who identified himself as biracial, referenced the many stories of segregation he had heard from family members. He likewise presented a “tipping point” argument about enrollment percentages based on race. He believed this would result in segregation as a natural outcome—not because it was legally imposed:

E2MJr: Also you’ve got to recognize that when you live in a Southern—we live in Rivertown, Alabama. I mean that’s about as SOUTHERN [emphasizes “Southern”] as you can get. And so if you zone schools in a way that you already put or you already have schools that are majority Black, majority White—just that, you know, even if it’s minor, you know, overturn, like a 60/40, you still have a majority one-way school. Living in a Southern state like we do, kids start to get drawn because, I mean, it’s only been—it seems like for us, you know, we don’t remember . . . “Oh, you know, segregation.” Like he said, that was so long ago . . . And it wasn’t so long ago . . . So when you zone it in a way that already puts it in a majority, then kids end up getting drawn to schools and you end up segregating stuff all over again.

Unlike other students, he described levels of tolerance towards attending school with students who were not the White norm. The *de facto* segregation this student described accounted for how students were attracted to certain schools, though for him, this started with how schools were zoned. He, too, referenced traditional racist practices that continued as a mindset—this is a Southern state where such actions are typical. But stating that it was happening “all over again”

likened this segregation to the legal segregation prevalent in times past, e.g., before *Brown* and the Civil Rights movement. It just happened in a different way today.

Other students made remarks along these lines. One East HS White senior was more direct in his critique of the restructuring:

E3MSr: It's almost like they found a way around the system to segregate things again but not have to make it equal across the board—because North, which is the majority White, has got the most advantages. They've got the most money . . . Right now West HS doesn't even have a school. You know. They're going to West HS—a falling apart school and that's an all Black school. It's almost like they reseggregated things and they just found a way to get around the system.

Although the process of separation was naturalized by taking advantage of the broad-based *de facto* segregated housing patterns, this student maintained that the restructuring was nothing less than finding a way to get around the legal protection against *de jure* segregation. Worse yet, this form of racial separation also led to inequality of community-based resource allocation—something the East HS students noticed and critiqued. It upset students that the schools could be so unequal and still be allowed.

Students, then, had a variety of ways to describe the creation of an all Black school under the newly restructured system and mainly talked about it in terms of a type of social separation by building assignment from zone lines created by leaders. Many likened this to the practice of *de jure* segregation. A deeper analysis of this division and one was raised in most West interviews was the evidence those students used to prove that the restructuring had not only been racially motivated, but was done to remove West Side Black children from schools where Whites attended. Students argued that leaders knew beforehand how the attendance lines divided the

students—especially since the high schools followed the middle school arrangement. For the majority of the students, however, definitive proof of a racial division came by their predictions of how the impending rezoning lines would be drawn.

### *Rezoning*

The second sub-area of data on the racial demographics of the schools is the meaning of the pending rezoning, which was a topic of conversation even before any formal reports were given at school board meetings or reported in the news. In order to talk about students' ideas on the anticipated rezoning, an important sequence to consider is that the interviews took place between late fall 2005 and late spring of 2006 before any rezoning plans were officially made. The demographer hired by the city schools' lawyer gave a preliminary presentation in February of 2006 to the local school board of the enrollment data he had collected thus far, though the data collection still required refining. This was reported in the newspaper, which some students may have read. All of the West HS interviews had taken place before this presentation, however. At the time the demographer's initial assessments of the patterns of enrollment had been given, no plan was revealed to the public about what the rezoning might look like. Nevertheless, students made many guesses as to what they believed would most likely happen because the new West, which would open in a few months, was located in the middle of the Northern schools' zone.

Overwhelmingly, West students discussed the restructuring as a separation of Blacks from Whites, and this idea will surface again and again across the various data areas. The type of racial separation West HS students explained was not just that students attending West High were not wanted in schools with White children. Though they talked about being kept in the geographic region that was their "side" of town, they noted that it was undesirable (to Whites) when the schools became "too Black," making race the primary criteria for assessing the



schools' demographics. So the race problem was not entirely solved when West students were separated from the others by following the unitary status zone lines; they heard and quoted rumors indicating that the other two new high schools were considered to be too Black, making it necessary for school leaders to find ways to send more Black students "back" to West. This led West HS students to conclude that their school would continue to be all Black—but now with even more Black students. This implied that their school was the one where the students who were not wanted elsewhere would end up. What follows is how they ascertained that the plan was to separate students by race across the city, which student after student pointed out as they discussed the impending zone lines.

The first response below came when the students were invited to share conversations they had had or had heard in their community about the schools. This student summed up matter-of-factly what many others would say about the new high schools being too Black:

W18FJr: Some of 'em have made, like predictions. Like, last year they were saying that they was going to start—when new West was being built, they was goin' to start rezoning all the East, North, and West folks. And some of 'em said they was goin'—when they built North and East they wasn't intending on so many African American kids to go there. They wanted—they wanted it to be for [stops and gropes for word; a peer prompts her] for—Caucasian kids. [laughs]

Interviewer: White kids—yes?

W18FJr: They didn't expect so many Black people to go to their school and now they see how—it's like a lot of Black folks that go to East High. I know they ain't expecting a lot of Black folks to go to East High. And it's a lot of White folks at North High, but

over here we just all—Black. It's like 98% Black over here. I personally think that that is the main reason they did that. They just wanted to sep—segregate us all again.

While this assessment projected a reconfiguration of the schools based upon white supremacist ideas of ideal demographic make ups of the schools, older students usually made references to enrollment patterns they already experienced in the city schools to predict how the rezoning would take form:

W4FSr: I think the first step was made when they decided to split up the schools—when they split up North, West, and East middle schools the way they did—when we went to the sixth, seventh, eighth grade school. That was their first step to segregate it out. And then when we came to West—I guess they voted on it when we was at West MS—and they was saying “neighborhood schools.” If they having neighborhood schools, why is our school on Center Street? All these kids on the West Side—that's not their neighborhood. The same kids who walk to school—they're going to have to catch the bus from this school all the way over there. So it's really not a neighborhood. And if you look at—like [Name] said, they try to split it up—to send the kids to North High who stay on Park Side. But when they rezone--when it's the new school that opens—all them kids are going to go right back--to the new West. And that's what they try to do. That was—that they first intentions—just to make it seem like that way. But then, after the years passed, they going to send them right back to new West when it opens.

This senior, like others, traced the history of the school splits from the grant of unitary status to highlight that this progression, since its inception, continually separated Black students out. She

recalled the use of “neighborhood schools” rhetoric<sup>17</sup> to legitimize the middle school plan, but pointed out the contradictions of this justification by examining the actual restructuring. The schools are not located in the neighborhoods—but they do allow students to be racially separated. She noted the pattern that Black students were gradually being sifted out from certain schools and that more of the same would take place through the rezoning, as Black students from North HS will be “sent back” to West. This, she argued, was the original goal of the system’s leaders. The strange placement of the Park Side students out of their neighborhood would soften the effects of the racial division, though Black students would eventually be sent back after the new West High opened. This was a strategy of gradualism, which the middle and high school divisions seemed to follow, and which she expected the rezoning would complete.

The impending separation of students through rezoning was clearly a topic of debate, but though many voiced mistrust in school and city leaders, not all Black students agreed with this perspective. One East HS sophomore relayed what she had heard in the Black community, on the local radio station—everywhere she went. This was tiresome to her and she complained that Blacks were being too negative about the restructuring:

E4FSO: People want to consider as with West being a new school that once they rezone, it’s going to be more Black students at West instead of having more Blacks at East or North. They want to consider, once they rezone, North is gonna be a whole White

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<sup>17</sup> News articles about the high school restructuring design quoted people using the term “neighborhood schools” in community debates or as part of their reportage, though school leaders during this time never used that term. They used the term “community schools,” thus avoiding the negative associations “neighborhood schools” has with the anti-busing proponents of the 1970s. Neighborhood schools commonly represent a stance against integration, as critical race theorists highlight, due to *de facto* segregated housing patterns. During debates in 1997 about applying for unitary status community members expressed fears that neighborhood schools would be created, so some awareness existed among school leaders about the contradiction inherent in this type of school arrangement.

school, East is going to be a mixture of Black and White, and West is going to be a whole Black school. But I feel as though that's not really going to happen. You probably still might have your Whites as West. You probably still will have your Blacks at North. But I guess because of the culture and the race—that's why we have so many problems....they just won't come together and be like, "I think this is going to turn out great!" They just want to consider us [Black people] as negative and everything like that.

By attending East HS, she had not experienced the overt racial separation as West students had, yet she identified with a negative image she believed the dissention reflected on Blacks locally. She sensed racial tension in these debates, yet thought that critique about the racial division portrayed all Blacks as negative. She, like many East HS Black students, never referenced the hierarchical meaning of race the West Black students attributed to the restructuring. Quite possibly because the expected rezoning was not a part of their immediate experience, it never came up in any other interviews with East HS students.

If East HS Black participants did not or perhaps could not relate to the significance of the impending rezoning, for many West students it was a fait accompli that would separate out the Black students who were not wanted at the schools Whites attended. To provide an example of how prevalent this expectation was, one West student stated that the new West would have more students as she and her peers discussed their new building. When asked how she knew this, she insisted it was because of the rezoning, which in her understanding had already been done, W16FFr: "Yeah, they already rezoned the schools." At this point, new attendance lines had not yet been drawn. When asked who would come to West, another student named off every housing project and some section eight apartment complexes, including ones where students attending East High and North High lived:

W6FFr: People from [Project #1] are going to be at West. [Project #3], King Court, Carter Grove, Erwin City.

Teacher: Are they putting more Blacks at this school?

W6FFr: Yeah.

W9MFr: [voice of surprise] No—No way.

Some students seemed unaware of the impending rezoning, as the comment of disbelief illustrates, but the students' listings of these areas<sup>18</sup> indicated that many had already drawn this conclusion. This was not a new revelation for them, but fact or an expectation that exuded certitude of the way the restructuring was unfolding over time.

The students who pointed out the expected outcome of the rezoning usually tied it back to evidence that the entire restructuring plan had been to separate Black kids out of desegregated schools—specifically, Black students living on the West Side. In an interview with West seniors, one student explained his impressions:

W20MSr: And I believe that the new West they build—I think they building it to further—separate the schools because once—like, where the West at now—it's mostly a Black community over there. So when they go to rezone at the new West, all the Black—most of the Black kids—at North and East—will be going to West High.

This student also detected an element of gradualism with the overall building plan—West was located in the center of the North High zone, in an area where mostly Blacks lived. Students living south of the new West HS attended East HS. He observed the practicality of the rezoning in that Black students currently attending North or even East lived close by the newly built West.

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<sup>18</sup> On May 3, 2007, the rezoning plan was approved by the school board in a 3 to 5 vote. Every street, section eight housing, and housing project West students across interviews predicted would be rezoned to West HS, actually were rezoned when the rezoning plan was adopted fourteen months later.

It would be logical for them to attend West HS, though to him it still indicated the goal of racial separation because they would be removed from two integrated schools. He, too, listed housing projects, apartments, and section eight housing areas that would be zoned back. When asked if he knew where those students currently went to school, he responded, “Yeah—North High School.”

Another senior described the main streets that sectioned off entire regions, predicting how the students would be separated, concluding: W21MSr: “Everybody then going to West. Everybody that stay over there Black. Most of the Blacks come from North High—there that’ll be majority White then. That’ll be two Whites—one Black.” His summary was global—the eventual racial composition of the three city high schools. This study is not an analysis of statistical evidence to point out the degree to which the students were correct in their assumptions that North and East would become majority White schools. Many Black students actually would continue to attend East HS. But with the new West building located in the middle of the North High zone students doubted that the integrated high schools would remain as such. Most Blacks were being removed and they predicted that this would continue.

Some students talked about the logic of the current zoning as they considered who would end up in the buildings—proximity was not the only criteria:

W22FJr: Like Cameron Heights? That’s a nice neighborhood, therefore that nice neighborhood go to East HS. You see what I’m saying? They wouldn’t zone Cameron Heights to come to West. But they will zone [names Housing Project 1] or—no offense or [names Housing Project 2] or [names section eight apartment complex]—you know, to come to West because—look at what side of town they on.

W18FJr: You won't hear of them zoning of [Housing Project 4] to go to North High!  
[Outburst of laughter from students]

W22FJr: Exactly. I'm surprised they zoned Park Side to go to North High, but I guess they must've ran out of lines and places for them to go and they just puttin' 'em somewhere.

Race intersected with class and region here as students considered where those living in nicer subdivisions would attend school. It was significant that students were bussed across the entire city to attend the school in the far north even though they lived much closer to East (and West); students in nice neighborhoods closer to West HS would remain at East HS. This was evidence to them that leadership knew who lived in each subdivision, which students felt influenced where students were zoned. Notably, the students in housing projects would most definitely be earmarked for West HS—something East HS students also pointed out. The outlier this student observed was that students from Park Side, a west neighborhood, attended North High. As she explained, this was an anomaly that must have occurred because there was just no more room for them anywhere else. Her phrase, “just put them somewhere,” indicated how these students read the level of respect they expected from leadership towards West Side Black students. These were not students who were valued and North HS was not considered to be a placement to advantage them academically. They were simply placed wherever there was room for the leftover students. West Side students were treated as leftovers.

Other West HS students talked about the rezoning in ways that would further segregate the high schools as certitude, though that idea troubled students:

Interviewer: Hmm. So do people in the community believe that the new West will be integrated?

W5FSr: [very softly—almost inaudible at first, but sounds surprised] I don't know. I don't know. 'Cause I know by them—by them bringing—I guess half of Erwin that's coming there and I know Park Side is coming there. Half of Erwin—those people go to East and Park Side goes to North. So, but, even then, the majority of them of them are Black. So—it's just going to be one big Black school.

Though students were troubled by this idea, somehow they were certain that this was the plan for the rezoning. It was not always apparent where this idea came that students from East would be sent back to West. Some students were aware of this commentary and reported hearing that East High had “too many Blacks.” They also believed the rezoning would correct this “error” once the new West building was completed even though this speculation was shocking news to others.

The following student repeated an observation, which by his admission had caught him by surprise:

W13MSr: I believe it was a co-worker said that they would let—that they would have East High—mainly to try to get the Black folk out of East 'cause it's [names the school's Namesake] East. Let them have his school. I'm not sure whether they gonna try to rezone to where all the Black people go in between West and North. I'm not sure what they would do about that. I hope that they're not going to go back to that.

Rezoning students out of either school was seen as an overt act of racial discrimination far too similar to racist practices allowable prior to *Brown*. What the rezoning meant for West students was two-fold: first, schools that were “too Black” were undesirable, so being Black carried this negative connotation with it, but second and more importantly, Black children from the West Side were not wanted in any integrated school even if they had attended those schools all of their lives. Commentary steeped in white supremacist ideas across the community indicated to the



students that there could be “too many” Black children in schools that Whites attended— somewhat like a tipping point argument. The pending rezoning, for many, meant a corrective was needed to further remove Blacks from the integrated high schools. In other words, the rezoning would correct this anomaly of schools that were becoming too Black. This reflected to the students, whether intended by leaders or not, that children from the West Side were not wanted in any of the schools in the eastern and northern parts of the city. To these students, the purpose of the restructuring was far different from a call to create community schools to attract more students,<sup>19</sup> as echoed by leadership rhetoric throughout the restructuring process. From their analyses, its purpose was to separate the Black West Side students from the other students in the system to serve the wishes of Whites.

Participants from West High often stated that many Black students would be “sent back” to their school. Some thought that through error or miscalculation on the part of leaders they ended up in the integrated schools, but were not wanted there. A worse scenario some students believed was that through calculated transitions they were used to integrate schools for a season to portray the restructuring as fair, but would be gradually relocated back to the West Side without much notice or fighting against it. In either case, they were considered as “less” and not wanted.

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<sup>19</sup> This idea of attracting more students at the expense of the West Side Black students is a tragic point. I am not sure the students went that far in their conclusions, but the rhetoric of attracting in other students is premised on the basis of removing the undesirable students from the two regions to accomplish this. They seemed to focus on the “separating out” of the West Side Black students—which included them. But I did not see them thinking that the other schools would then attract more Whites as a result, though they frequently mentioned that White parents did not want them at those schools. That they are not wanted is hurtful and reason enough for it to be wrong. That students not even in the system would benefit at their expense would have been far too tragic to even fathom.

West HS students' responses to the racial divide reflected the idea that Whiteness was the desirable demographic of the two integrated schools that needed to be recouped. A contradiction arose with this, however. The extra small West HS needed more students to have a chance at better success with the many visible outcomes of curricular and extracurricular offerings common to a comprehensive school. So even with this burden to increase their precariously small enrollment, the way more students would come to their school undermined being viewed as equal or as valued as the integrated schools. The anticipated influx of students who would be sent back to West signified something else; it would not come from a diverse group of students, especially White, selecting West HS as a school of choice.

Zone lines are arbitrary—they can be created in any fashion and do not just follow who is closest to a school, as students often pointed out. This focused student attention on the ethical dimensions of the goals of the rezoning. And what leadership and persons with influence wanted and worked towards was something often stated or alluded to in students' responses. West HS needed not just more students, but ones from a variety of backgrounds—race, class, culture, talents, geographic region, and interests—something more closely examined in later themes on resources and curriculum. Students were bused to integrate North HS, but none were bused to integrate West HS. Yet, according to some West students, those Black students were bused as a master plan to gradually allow Whites to have their own school and not because Blacks were necessarily wanted at North HS. Some believed the only reason a high school could exist north of the river was if Black students were bused to it, though once the new West was built, there would be no need to keep Black students there who were not really wanted. In other words, *de facto* segregated housing patterns complicated the attendance lines. Whites and Blacks living in nice houses along the Southern end of the West Side attended East HS or North HS instead of

West, which was closer. As they wondered, how could that be fair? Only Black West Side students would be sent back, which had consequences for West High's image and possibilities for success even if its enrollment finally increased. Certain students would get to remain at the other two schools while West Side Blacks would be sent back. Rather than correcting attendance through zoning to ensure there were three integrated schools, the rezoning would make other schools Whiter while their school remained all Black, so on principle, students felt it was unfair to send Black students back to West. Yet as the resources and curriculum themes will point out, they needed more students in order to function as a comprehensive high school that could offer the same programs as the other two schools. Becoming a larger Black school would continue to reflect their image of "less" to the greater community. Removing West Side Blacks from the racially mixed schools would make them Whiter and wealthier, and they would continue to be viewed as "better" than West HS, the school for Blacks who were not wanted and needed to be separated out.

#### *Summary of Racial Demography*

Students, aware of the differences in demographic compositions of the schools, referenced these in a variety of ways, often drawing on their experiences of the restructuring. Though they did not understand the process for creating zone lines, many indicated that they reflected choices of leadership. That the high schools would replicate the middle schools was a clear indication to many that leaders were moving the restructuring in a direction of racial separation. For students, the building assignment patterns that created an all Black high school conflicted with promises of equity. Students not directly experiencing the racial isolation could not make sense of how this had happened while students who were separated could not make sense of how this could have ever been permitted or considered fair.

Although the racial separation was legally allowable and the process was naturalized through *de facto* segregated housing patterns, the pattern of the building assignment led West students to sense that the community valued them as less—a pattern that will continually surface throughout the data presentation. Every way of thinking through the restructuring indicated that Black students from the West Side were not wanted; they either would be removed from integrated schools or prevented from ever attending them—even after an entire school trajectory of racial isolation. They did not label this as segregation in the legal sense, as Whites could and did attend their school. However, the twists and strains their thinking had to go through to explain why their school was nearly 100% African-American were both sad and arguably damaging. At least several West students stated that the school assignment policy meant the schools were “going back to the way it used to be” under the social segregation patterns of earlier times—a statement they could very well have heard from older family members who had lived that experience under Jim Crow. West students noticed they were treated differently and believed this was done because they were viewed as “less.” In their responses, this difference translated into a hierarchical ranking of people that was held by the media, the community at large, school leaders, and parents and students from the other schools, which the themes that follow will examine in detail.

### Resources

In this section, the second data area is presented, that of resources. This data area indicated the importance of race, class, and region related to structural characteristics that would foster or inhibit the generation of resources crucial to the success of the new high schools. While the previous data area looked at how students interpreted the racial division of the schools to assess the fairness of the restructuring, this data area provides student analyses of the

restructuring regarding the types of material inequities they experienced, which contributed to another layer of meaning for the restructuring. The most obvious of these was the building and athletic facilities. As already indicated, the racial division of students came first through the middle schools. But an important distinction with the restructuring was that students attending the integrated middle schools were housed in the newest middle school buildings. For high school they moved to brand new buildings complete with state-of-the-art athletic facilities. This was in stark contrast with the West Side students who attended the oldest middle school building in the system (built in 1965) and were placed in the fifty-year old, former all Black high school (built in 1954) that many of their older family members had once attended as a segregated school. Their outdoor athletic facilities were all located on the former West HS eastern campus, 1.8 miles away (or 22 blocks), to which athletes had to provide their own transportation. West HS students attended the old building for three years, and still occupied this building when students were interviewed. Construction of their new building at times left the usable athletic facilities on the former eastern campus without electricity (affecting hours of practice with no lighting on the fields) or running water. Though the original plans (as presented to the city council for funding purposes in 2001) were to renovate one or both of the old West HS buildings for the all Black high school and middle school some time after the other new high schools were built, this plan was eventually changed to the promise of new<sup>20</sup> buildings.

Delays in the new West High's construction allowed for many types of interpretations to surface across the community, including whether West Side students even deserved a new

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<sup>20</sup> The idea of renovations caused some backlash within the community. Though many West families were more concerned with the level of education than with a new building, others saw this unfairness as reflecting the value leaders placed on their children and sought to attain equal facilities for the West HS students. In one community meeting, members articulated that attaining some measure that would even just approximate equality in resources has historically always been a struggle for Black citizens (field notes, spring, 2004).

building. The building facilities were not the only material resource obvious to students, however. Many understood the ways in which community wealth associated with each school's location would differentially benefit the schools. Given the great reliance the school system had on community funding for extracurricular activities (which were no longer state-funded due to several rounds of proration), students debated the extent to which equity could be achieved under the newly restructured system that divided the schools into communities that varied in wealth.

At first glance, one might not think of enrollment as a resource. In this study, however, the great discrepancy between the all Black school and the two integrated schools led to a host of dilemmas for the West High students. As mentioned, the West HS students were perplexed about the increasingly segregated contexts of the schools, as it reinforced the idea that they had been separated from the other students. In this sub-area of the data, West students identified difficulties they faced with their extra small enrollment, making school size a resource crucial to their school's success. They attempted to understand the rhetoric of fairness through the lens of attendance lines, but became confused about the degree to which school choice operated. For many it seemed that families had options to move into or out of a particular zone. The idea of choice led them to consider how their much smaller enrollment undermined academic and extracurricular programs that could otherwise have attracted students to their school. Their demographic profile made it less likely that people would choose to attend their school—parents would not want to send children to a place lacking in diversity if they could help it. More than a few participants admitted this as true for their own families, and several had attended at least one school not in the West Side for this and other reasons. From what West students could see, differences in resources—including their small enrollment, placement in the old building, and lack of community funding—worked against the success of programs visible to the community,

all of which would further affect their enrollment negatively if choice was operating. Woven into this data area are the many ways the West students responded to the various lacks in resources that, when combined, seemed to intensify the difficulties they would face in making their school successful. In the end, conversations indicating that West was less surfaced across the community, yet the very structure of the schools allocated resources in ways that overwhelmingly favored the two integrated schools while working against West HS. The students saw this and felt a general abandonment by leadership and the community.

The three sub-areas in the data specific to resources include: (1) the ways in which the building plants and their locations contributed to students' sense of a dual hierarchy (two good and one bad) of the schools within the system, (2) differences in community funding as an outcome of building location, and (3) the size of the school as a resource. In this data area, the locations of the schools became important because students could not really separate the building plant from the level of wealth surrounding the schools. Just as important as having a new facility was the potential for community funding to support the many extracurricular programs that had to be built up after the split. Since students saw this as an ongoing process (in attempts to recreate what the former West offered), they paid attention to the degree to which a region could offer much needed financial support as well as overt signs of successful programs. Smaller school enrollments, though initially disappointing for students attending the integrated schools, grew considerably fast from substantially higher enrollments at their feeder middle schools. By year three, they were nearly double the enrollment of West HS, which actually had declined. As might be expected, extracurricular activities at the two larger schools, including athletics, did not face problems to the extent that an extra small enrollment continued to pose for West HS.

Enrollment was a problem that students from all the schools mentioned, though their experiences greatly contrasted in this respect. Overcrowding was a problem that East HS and North HS students cited frequently. They approached the limits of their 1200 capacity facilities, but students mainly referred to large class sizes or other features the new facilities did not seem equipped to handle. East HS students, for example, noted that having a larger band on the field would greatly enhance their halftime show and come closer to what the old West once had, but how could their small band room accommodate that many more students? North HS students were also concerned about overcrowding at their school, though felt that zone lines needed stricter enforcement to correct this problem. Both East HS and North HS students often complained of large class sizes as an outcome of an overcrowded facility—too many students meant packing them into classes, so their understanding of building capacity was greatly influenced by the mushrooming class sizes they witnessed over time. This caused confusion about the wisdom of the restructuring because somehow it had not solved the problem they felt had led to this change in the first place. Concern over school size was quite different for West students. Their small enrollment worked against them in ways that invariably fed disparaging commentary they worked hard to refute or contain, even though this at times became a seemingly impossible task.

The type of programs a school could offer was tied to these three types of resources and to a certain extent, would influence students' choices of switching out of or remaining in a given attendance zone. With all of this, what did it mean to create three schools where resources crucial to the success of the schools—including building facilities, regional wealth, and enrollment sizes—were allocated so differently for West when compared with the two integrated schools? Would these distinctions even be important if school leaders had promised equality



across the board for the schools? Given the transition process all three schools needed to go through to build programs from nothing, how equal could they be over time?

### *Building Facilities*

The first subarea of the data is that of the building facilities, which includes both the physical plants of the schools and the meaning of the building timeline. As West students considered the building timeline, some indicated that the old building they were placed in was synonymous with their value as individuals. Remarks from peers led them to understand the symbolic nature of attending school in the old building—the students who occupied it were lower than students who attended the new buildings. The question of merit surfaced over time as to whether the West Side kids should even be given a new school, an idea about which the youngest participants struggled most. That the oldest buildings in the entire system happened to be located on the West Side and house all Black student populations for their entire school trajectory may have suggested a hierarchy of who was valued by leadership.

Community members were aware of the problems of equity regarding facility plans for the West Side middle and high schools. The May 2000 Restructuring Committee Report recognized problems with only renovating the two former high school's buildings or its old middle school building for the restructured West middle and high schools. In their view, equity demanded at the very least that one new building be built for the western area students:

The City Schools' experience proves that the public perceives new schools as better schools and one of the attractions of a multiple school approach (as well as the mega school approach) is the expected impact of new schools on enrollment. Failing to build new will significantly reduce the enrollment impact and benefits of multiple schools.

Ultimately, the West Middle School zone should have either a new high school or middle school—at least. (*Restructuring Committee Report*, 2000, pp. 28-9)

At this point, the system's facilities plan projected new high schools for the north and east areas, plus a new eastern middle school. The old high school and middle school buildings were projected for renovation for the western area's two secondary level schools. The restructuring committee members noticed an obvious inequity in this arrangement, leading them to conclude that only renovating the western schools could not be considered fair. If the potential impact a new building could immediately have on enrollment was recognized by the community restructuring team, it seemed lost as a pressing concern by leadership; ultimately western area students had to wait three years for a high school and two years beyond that for their new middle school.

Recognized or not by leadership, students noticed the appeal for a new building and remarked about peers who had found a way to get to attend a new school:

W23FFr: Like for people who stay over here—they use like, other people's addresses to get to go to other schools 'cause for instance there's this person—somebody that stays next to me and they go to North High. But, the only reason they go to North High is because they use their Grandma address so they can get over there.

Interviewer: Why do they do that?

W23FFr: Because they think that that school is supposed to be better just 'cause it's newer than this one.

West students often attributed their enrollment loss, in part, to peers' attraction to the new buildings.

West students also drew heavily upon the symbolic nature of attending an old building while all of their peers had gone on to brand new buildings. They were proud of its legacy—and remaining in the original West location and retaining the West name helped reinforce this positive idea. But if there had been so much money for building three new buildings in the eastern and northern areas (one middle school and two high schools with athletic facilities), it was confounding that they continued to occupy an old building. For some, this seemed to mean that people questioned giving them a new building. Students, then, interpreted the separation of students along a race-based hierarchy that was further reinforced by the physical plant as well:

W14MFr: It [the restructuring] was to try to put all the Black people in one school and put the White folks in the other two schools.

Interviewer: Develop how you understand that taking place.

W14MFr: Well, they might think the White folks couldn't learn as well in the class with us. They probably thought they was better than us—and they kept us in the raggedly school.

Interviewer: Have you had conversations about that with . . . friends at North High and friends at East High?

W19MFr: Yes ma'am . . . they think that, "We've got a new school." All they think is they're better than us. And—they kept us in this raggedly school.

Even without reactions from students in the new buildings towards them, West students understood that the building assignment reflected a hierarchy of people, especially along a color line. White people were in the new schools. The all Black school was in the old building. Their peers in the new schools thought Black West Side students were less—something placement in the old building signaled and something West HS students continued to sense even though they

would enter their new building the following school year. Placing them in the old building was interpreted as reluctance on the part of leadership to give children who were “less” a new school. They would get a new building, but it still indicated that they were less because they were separated from White students. Getting their new building could not erase this idea.

Seniors felt this change more so because they had friends with whom they had attended the old West in ninth grade. One West HS senior reflected on this:

W20MSr: I think it caused tension between students, too, because when I was in ninth grade I had a lot of friends and now they going to North High—they don’t—talk to me or anything. You know—they like changed—because of the rezoning. And it caused a lot of problems when they

Interviewer: What changed them?

W20MSr: I believe because of the new school they built they thought they were probably a little like—higher. We were beneath them or something, you know, because they got a new school or whatever. And since we still in the same old school we don’t—probably don’t mean much—are less than the other two schools—you know? That’s my thought.

This student learned that being in the old building changed relationships—they were now avoided. Students attending the old building were now considered “lower” by peers in the new schools who believed they deserved new buildings. Peers in the new buildings rejected them, then, though being placed in the old building for so long also signaled that they were not valued. West High’s old building brought with it a sense of lower status that they could not erase, but they hoped their new building could:

W4FSr: I think that when they move into the new building, it's going to calm down like the rivalry between the three schools. Well—it's not—there's always going to be team rivalry, but the aspect that West HS is lower than others because, you know—'cause now that they get a new building, everyone might look at the schools like they're equal again.

Interviewer: Oh—because they're not equal right now?

W4FS: I guess people look at it like that. 'Cause we're in an old building and then they're going to a new building. So they might—you know, people might feel better about the new school.

Students associated moving into their new building with correcting West High's ascribed lower status. A new building meant that maybe they could be viewed as equal with the other two schools.

In a different focus group, students referenced the same phenomenon—lower status. This surfaced as they envisioned entering their new building:

W24FJr: But, you know, when we get ready to go over there, and then everybody started coming—they may not act the same, but everybody from West gonna act the same. But see if we, like—the people that go to North High and East High—if we do them like they do us—like, try to act so high class and think they got everything that we don't got, they'll be feeling about—crazy.

Envisioning school in their new building triggered thoughts of the higher versus lower status. In anticipating a return of other students to their school, several indicated that they would not treat peers the way they had been treated—as lower. Part of their lower status was tied to the building. Still, even having this conversation was confounding because they all had come from the original West, so a hierarchy of better and less should not have existed:

W22FJr: But what's so funny about that is them the same people that started out at West. They fail to realize that this was East High and North High—that was West. It ain't nothing but a branch of the old West. [uses hands on desk to draw this] They broke off West into three branches and West is all over the place now so I mean they can't too much look down on us 'cause we still at West. They from West too. I don't care if they ninth grade, tenth grade. Regardless of the fact—if they wouldn't have broken off they would've been going to West.

West students argued that since they all proceeded from the big West, it did not make sense that their school acquired a lower status. Had it remained as one school, they would all be in the same building. These remarks illustrate the extent to which West students sensed that placement in the old building reflected to everyone their lower status. Peers at North HS and East HS had more materially but used this to distinguish themselves as better than the West students. A building should not have made a difference, though some realized that maybe being assigned to an old building did:

W18FJr: Well, I think—some people attitudes have changed 'cause—they going to a new school and they think they better than us now since they got a new building. So—they have a new attitude.

Interviewer: How do you pick up on—attitudes?

W18FJr: Like, you could talk to somebody, like, that you used to go to school with, and then they go to like East High or North High and they're a totally different person. They don't want to speak to you 'cause you go to West—which is a old building.

Interviewer: So, you're saying that they associate the students with the type of building you're going to?

W18FJr: Yes.

W22FJr: They also base it on the side of town you on. Just because we're on the West Side they consider us to be, you know, alley and loud and bad and rude and—you know, all that little stuff right there.

Interviewer: Was it like that when the West was all one big West?

W22FJr: I mean, no. Everybody had their little groups. Like, if you didn't want to hang with this crowd you didn't hang with them. It wasn't like, "Oh, you know, "We ain't going to talk . . . they on left hallway." You know—all that. It ain't like that 'cause—I don't know. They was all together. It was one school. It was West.

The symbolic nature of being placed in the old building exaggerated their being treated as less. Rejection and lower status were partly the old building, though it was difficult to separate this from their location—it was both. Students in the former big West would have been in their own small groups, yet disparate groups would all have been a part of West and therefore not singled out and marked as less as they now were. Distinctions of students by race and region that diminished or disappeared in the former West High's mixed setting were now exaggerated along a hierarchy as race and region became distinguishing characteristics of the schools.

At least a few students noticed and debated the degree to which the West students had been treated unfairly regarding their building. Though this came up as an observation about inequitable resources, it generated a counter-response—the expectation that West students would ruin a new building so perhaps should not get one:

E5FSO: They're glad that they're getting part of—a new school too. 'Cause like, at first it seemed like they were getting left out with, you know, the new schools or whatever and

not getting—that was an old school or whatever. But they're glad that they're getting a new school now you know.

E6FSo: [subdued tone] I've heard what [Name] said too, but I also heard that they were kind of worried about if they were going to mess up the new school and make it look really bad and if they would—if the community was just wasting their money—fixing up a new school for them.

E4FSo: Well, I have heard that sometimes people want to criticize West talking about that West has BAD [emphasizes the word “bad”] children at their school, but I don't think so. But, they'll come along with the new building. I think everybody will be fine because they'll get to do as much as North and East does.

Here was recognition that West students would at last have opportunities that East HS and North HS already enjoyed when they entered their new building. Students took sides on the debates about a new building—on the one hand, some advocated fairness for the West students, on the other they noted doubt expressed across the community that they would care for it. Another student intervened to explain why people would think they would ruin a school:

E6FSo: There are more Black people that go to that school and so it's less a ratio of White people so they think like—and there's a lot of projects around. SO they think that just because they live in the project, they got to be “ghetto” [gestures quotations marks] or something, so they're going to mess up the school. So that's why I think that's why people say it.

A predominately Black school located near housing projects, she believed, influenced community members' expectations of how the West students might treat a new building. One student was quick to point out that such views only served to portray West students as inherently



bad, robbing them of equal educational chances. The new West building signified much more than a place to attend school. It would end three years of inequalities in opportunities—something this student observed. Until they had their building with athletic facilities, West students would be held back in ways students at the other two schools were not. New facilities would at last remove some obvious barriers imposed by how the split had transpired.

One East HS junior listed the pejorative stereotypes of West students (which are deleted) that she felt led people to believe they would ruin a new building. In her understanding, the delays from a lack of funds and debate over location meant reluctance on the part of the leadership to provide West with a renovated or new school facility, something she felt stereotypes about the students might have promoted:

E7FJr: I think it's because the fact that most people that go to West stay on the West Side. . . . So when they say that it's going to be a all Black school I kind of think like when they were arguing about them building West a new school, I kind of think that they didn't want to give them a new school because they figured that it was all Black kids and they probably were goin' to mess the school up anyway—like they weren't goin' to care, when that's not the case. I mean, of course some people were goin' to think like that.

But then some people are actually goin' to school to get their education.

The delays contributed to students' belief in the reluctance on the part of leadership to give West students a new building. This reluctance was explained by stereotypes the students believed prevailed across the community about the West students. Some West students felt it was being left aside that signaled to everyone they were not important. Being considered from the start of the restructuring was more important symbolically than a new building:

W22FJr: It's kind of like they putting us on the back burner. They feel like they went over there and built these new schools for these other people, but they can't build us one. . . . They didn't even have to rebuild me a school. They could've went over there and renovated it . . . . I would've been so happy if they just did that.

Even as their building was being completed, students continued to sense that West HS students were regarded as less than those attending the other schools. The delays, even if not intended to do so, taught the students that West students were somehow not as good as the students attending the integrated schools.

### *A Student Walkout*

During the spring semester of 2004, a group of West HS students banded together to break the stalemate concerning the construction of their new building. The old West's eastern campus was to have been torn down after closing in May 2003, to prepare for construction on the same site, but a year later this still had not happened. A tug of war ensued within the community over the location of the new West: should it be located on the old West East campus or deeply embedded in the West Side community on a parcel of low lying park land that had drainage problems but considerable open space surrounding it? When community members realized that the old West East campus site acreage was much smaller<sup>21</sup> than those of the other two high schools, further debate regarding West High's new location continued. Equity in the building timeline now became a bigger issue in terms of campus size, making the park site an attractive option even if many within the West Side community shunned the idea of placing a school in what they regarded to be a "swamp" that was far too secluded from the rest of the city.

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<sup>21</sup> The former West High's eastern campus was on a parcel of 32 acres, while North High's was 70 acres and East High's was 66 acres. The West HS site did not meet the minimum acreage now designated by the state for a high school, though was given special permission to build one as it had been a high school site for many decades.

Continued delays prompted West Side students to find ways to break the location stalemate and place the school where the majority of the students preferred for it to be and where the school board had voted to place it in 2002—on the old West HS’s East campus site.

West students who followed the debates strategized actions they could take. Students from the middle and high schools attended several school board and city council meetings to request that the location controversy be resolved so that their high school could be built. Over time, the unresolved debate seemed to divide the community, about which students were also sensitive. They believed that they, the students, should decide where their school was built since they were the ones who would attend it. For many, it was important symbolically to maintain the old West site and recoup its image as a top school in the state while maintaining its visibility in the community. When it seemed that all of the channels for attempting to be heard by local leaders had closed, the students organized a walkout to the School Board Office to present their perspective, which to date had been ignored by the adults. One student who had participated in the walkout provided insights into student efforts to end the delays in getting their school built:

W7FSr: At first a lot of the students were just kind of—we thought that, okay, the parents would take care of this. And we was watching in the newspaper and as time went on and we saw that they were still just kind of making up their mind on how things would be done and was not listening—to the adults that were attending the meeting. Then the students started talking about it, “Well, what can be done? What do we need to do?” . . . But before we had the actual walkout, we did attend some City Council meetings and—we had told our parents how we felt about the situation and we told them what we wanted to do . . . So, they [referring to parents] told us how the meetings went . . . And then we went to a couple of meetings. We went to a Board of Education meeting that was open

for the students to come speak . . . And then, at one particular meeting—maybe a few weeks before the walkout occurred, there were some city councilmen that spoke out against the students coming to speak at the meetings and—that really hurt our feelings because they were saying that we—basically we weren’t educated enough to come up with these opinions on ourselves and that they were being made. . . . They basically told us that that’s not what we believe and that’s not how we feel, and it was very hurtful because you also had some students from West Middle School that were speaking that day.

The West student participants who referenced the walkout believed it was not just a superficial reaction to debates over the location of their new building. When they felt the adults were not doing enough, they took it upon themselves to resolve the issue. Several sought out the appropriate civic channels to convince leaders to stop the delays and vote again for the eastern campus location. The students had done this on their own, though some leaders thought adults had put the students up to this, believing the issues involved were too complex for them to understand. This was an unexpected and devastating reaction to their civic involvement:

W78FSr: And when our classmates at school heard about that—and of course it was in the newspaper. When they read about it, they were like, “We have to do more. We have to do something because they’re just not paying us any attention.” And so, a lot of students [smiling as she recalls] didn’t say anything to their parents that there was a rumor of a walkout.

This student pointed out the joint effort of students who were trying to end the stalemate through a more radical way of garnering attention. Others analyzed the process as frustrating. It

indicated a lack of respect but also made them see that the restructuring did not make sense in terms of equity:

W25FSr: But see this whole issue boils down to. . . . I mean, it contradicts itself because it will say, “It’s all about the children.” But when we tried to give them our opinion, and they asked our opinion, they like, “Okay. They said this.” And then they brush us off. We had to write our mayor. We had to talk. I mean, like, walking out the school. We had to have a conversation with our teachers just to see, you know, just for a peace of mind because they don’t listen to us. They’ll say, “Well we want you all to—we want to see what you all want.” They’ll send us like little surveys—“How do you feel about this?” “How do you feel about that?” They was like they just wasting paper—they’ll look at it and throw it away. . . . And when we do come, they’re like, okay, you see who’s for you, see who’s against you. And if the people that are against your decision or your feelings are the same ones that say, “How do you feel?” [Imitates sweet tone of voice] But why are you asking how do we feel and you really don’t care? So I feel like they really neglect West High as a whole, because they ask you, “Where do you want the school?” “How do you want this?” But they never do it.

The students’ experience with going through civic channels made them sense neglect and a lack of care on the part of school leadership more than the delays themselves. They felt their building should have begun after closing the former West high school. Wavering for more than another year created frustration as they believed people were not committed to meeting their material needs, in great contrast with how building the other two schools had transpired. They doubted that there was genuine civic debate or recourse in the channels they attempted, at times referencing leaders’ stealth through early morning secret meetings to accomplish their own ends.

All of this was further indication to them that the restructuring was not really about the students, but about other interests.

### *Building Equity*

Though a few students from the other schools viewed the walkout as a sign of discipline problems on par with serious incidents at their own schools, West students saw it as instrumental in moving that process forward even if they did not feel they ever received recognition for their efforts:

W26FSr: [quietly] It's always been about a racial issue—simply because we have been overlooked, like [Name] said. I mean, even though we did—get our—get what we wanted—like the school over there. It took a lot. It took a whole lot. And when we did walk to the city board it still was like they looked over us because after that, they kept on holding meetings. They kept on holding meetings. And we would all come to the meetings and it would be one person that would always have the—right. And they didn't care what everybody else said. So—I mean, it took a lot. And I think it's all about the racial—factor—of the issue.

This student was sensitive to the issue of unequal power in public debate, which affected the building timeline. She felt that concerned community members, including themselves, were shut down or locked out of the decision-making process. Whites wanted new schools and got them in their neighborhoods rather easily while Blacks had to struggle to get their new building—even a smaller one, all of which reflected who had influence. This, she surmised, made it a racial issue. Students in other focus groups noted this different treatment with the building timelines:

W22FJr: I mean, why would students march downtown to the city board for us to get a school built? I mean, if they were going to build a North High and East High it should've been in the plans for us to build one too.

Not all students were aware of the uncertainty in plans for West HS when the other two buildings were being planned, though this student noticed that it seemed to be up for debate—a sign that West had been set aside by leaders from the outset and that their school was not considered a pressing issue. This may not have reflected the views of the leadership, but students continually read the delays as another indication that they were not regarded with importance as other students in the system obviously were.

### *Resistance and Resilience*

The resistance students displayed came through as they attempted to hasten their building by voicing their concerns through civic channels. There was also much resilience on the part of several students to overlook the delays in starting their new building by concentrating on personal diligence in their studies. These students were grateful to have good teachers (a comment they frequently made), so could set aside the fact that they were in the old building—something they said would not change their academic progress. Still, most of the system's other students enjoyed new facilities and numerous additional instructional resources the restructuring monies provided for technology, various media, band instruments, and other instructional materials, creating great differences in curricular and extracurricular outcomes.

In conversations with teachers, they told of their continual efforts to console and encourage their students about being in the old building. A building, after all, did not indicate the quality of education. What mattered was what students did with the opportunity to learn. Students who had these teachers echoed this mantra, taking such difference in stride:

W12FJr: School is not supposed to be the building. It's supposed to be what you get out of school. And I've learned, like, it doesn't matter if we go to school here or if we go to school at North HS or East HS, you're going to learn the stuff and learn it wherever a person goes . . . . I'm going to do my work here and do it at North HS or NOT do it here and NOT do it at North HS or East HS—you know? It doesn't matter about the building.

This student was adamant that she and other good students would work regardless of their building assignment. It did not make sense to blame academic failures on being in an old building. Such resilience was present in many West students who were interviewed, and this focus spilled over into extensive extracurricular involvement, not just for personal progress, but for the sake of the school. The old building was a disappointment, but was not something they would let hold them back. As earlier responses indicated, not all students talked about or experienced the building delays in such a positive manner, however.

The timeline for the buildings did not escape the attention of the students. Uncertainties created or reinforced certain assumptions about the groups the schools served, which was seen as unfair treatment of the West students. They showed resistance and resilience as they worked around this barrier. Even with their adaptations, they saw a clear demarcation of better and less that they interpreted through the new buildings, creating and confirming for them that the students were viewed by leaders along a hierarchy of better and less. Another lack West students talked about was community funding for their school, which further reinforced a sense they were less valued. These types of understandings surfaced quite strongly as students discussed community funding for extracurricular activities, which follows.



### *Community Funding*

The second data sub-area of resources was community funding, which came as private donations. As the previous sections demonstrated, students read the differences in demographics and facilities for the three high schools as evidence that some students were more valued and more respected in the system than others. In addition to reading these rather obvious differences as a source of inequity, students offered similar interpretations of more nuanced aspects of the new school arrangement. Many observed that the restructuring created inequities around a resource crucial to their programs—that of community wealth. Students associated the location of each school with the potential it had to fund extracurricular activities. This was because the existence of some educational opportunities, especially extracurricular programs, depended on parent and community donations. West students noticed that despite the rhetoric of equality, stark differences in the potential for fundraising existed between schools. As with the other differences between schools, the students believed that community leaders knew this would be the case. And since these leaders let it happen, they inferred that the community did not care as much about them or the survival of their programs.

#### *Building Location and Wealth*

As students considered the demographics of the schools, they pointed out the unfairness because regions signified a racial composition associated with certain degrees of wealth for each school. West students, for example, commented on the beautiful surroundings of North High and what this signified for community support; people living there would be very conscientious of taking care of and supporting their schools. The availability of community resources to the schools, then, was something students noticed and discussed in terms of the geographic area of the city associated with each school:

E8FJr: And like what I was trying to say—the school was built around in certain places—West—in poor surrounding, East HS and North HS in a better wealthy environment. So they think—you know. Yeah, they think, “Well okay, these schools are better because they’re built in better environments. They’re built by White folks. So they’re goin’ to have money so it’s goin’ to be better.” You know, they gonna take care of they stuff. Where at West—not as much, not as many people have, you know, money and materials to put into the school like they can put into North HS and East HS. That’s basically what it is. People just basin’ it on race—and where you live. That’s all.

The above assessment tied the schools’ locations to resources, though each area reflected class and race components of the schools. This student was aware of the connections between school programs and community wealth, which she also tied to Whiteness. She attributed the building of the integrated high schools to the monetary resources and influence of Whites, blending in community ownership with the actual building even though the three buildings were funded by the same school system. School leaders had emphasized creating a sense of ownership through the concept of community schools—schools located closer to homes would promote funding, especially for extracurricular programs not financially supported by the system. This student noted the community support in a different light, more as a separatist ethos—White people, who also happened to have financial resources, would support their neighborhood schools well—ones they seemed to “own.”

One West junior commented on distinctions of each school’s wealth associated with its geographic region to illustrate the unfairness over the split, which according to her, people in the community believed was intentioned. Like the previous student, she noted the hierarchy of wealth, though made finer distinctions:

W11FJr: The people on the North side of town—“‘the Rich’ [gestured quotation marks] so-claimed folks—need to stay on their side, the ‘poor folks’ [gestured quotation marks] need to stay on their side, and the ‘mediocre’ [gestured quotation marks] need to stay on the—other side of town,” is basically what I heard from some conversations.

This was the only response by a West student that strictly divided the schools by socioeconomic status. Her explicit tri-part ranking labeled the school locations by class, yet indicated a hierarchical division that coincided with the separatism promoted by the restructuring.

Exclusion seemed to be the main message, along with a sensitivity some students had to the class component of the school locations. West High’s racial composition coincided with an image of poverty reflected in its surrounding working class neighborhoods, further inscribing its status as less. An all Black school would automatically be considered poor, while the other two schools had a higher ranking based upon wealth that came with race and White privilege. Easily, students attending the other schools could think themselves better than they were.

Funding activities at West, it turned out, was a fact that students faced. West students noticed the monetary limitations they had with funding extracurricular activities. And at least some made a connection between the effect of little community financial support—which affected programs, and students choosing not to transfer back to West:

W21MSr: I feel that if we had the funding to do whatever we felt we needed to do, most people would come back because that’s the better--place to be. We just ain’t got that much funding.

This student tied the attraction of students to a school based upon what it could offer through extracurricular programs, so this resource would continue to be significant after all three schools had new facilities. If new buildings had caused students to leave West HS, a new building might

not attract them back. Parity with extracurricular programs could have kept them at West HS, but the other schools started out with far more resources to rebuild these important programs. Programs, then, continued to be very important—possibly more important than a building. By comparison, he noticed that West HS just did not have the same level of funding. This was discouraging to many West students and often a source of frustration as they considered what it would take to get students to return to West High.

Other West HS students attributed the lack of community investment in their school to a sense that they wouldn't take care of what was given to them:

W27MFr: They think they know how we treat stuff, you know, like just because our school look like—we didn't put it like this, you know. It was already like, rain, the conditions, stuff like that . . . And then they're like, they won't send us no money because they come over here and look at our school they think that they going to buy us something, we're going to mess it up. We didn't put it that way.

The lack of a building still overwhelmed how West HS students, especially the youngest ones, felt they were viewed by community members, even though they would move into their new building in a few months. This student might not have understood how funding worked exactly, but he did attribute a reluctance<sup>22</sup> by those who could provide it to support programs for students who did not seem worthy or responsible. His connection to unworthiness was the old building to

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<sup>22</sup> A counter point another freshman made was that people would most likely feel sorry for West and support them as they began their new school, but then withdraw this support, returning it to the other two high schools after one year of start up. This had happened when the all Black middle school was created—the other two middle schools relinquished their Title I monies as compensation, recognizing that the demographic division was unfairly lopsided and would work against West MS from the start. Though it cannot be inferred, she may have thought that West would initially be supported as a way to make up for the three year time lag in getting its new building.

which they were assigned—people would attribute its appearance to student vandalism done by them. This would be reason enough to deny them funding for programs.

Generating private donations to build up extracurricular clubs and activities, then, was a reality of the restructuring, though it also marked the schools in terms of success by the visible programs. All the schools experienced some degree of challenge by having to start from scratch along with the fact that there were now three high schools that needed support. West students especially saw that wealth was divided unevenly across the schools. Contrasts in support seemed to reinforce the idea that the community had abandoned them. The lack of funding greatly limited the programs they could offer, which affected their capacity to attract students to West HS. Funding was important, though students examined more closely the difficulties they had with their enrollment, which the next subarea of data considers.

#### *Enrollment as a Resource*

Enrollment, the third and final data subarea on resources that will be presented, was of special importance to West students because of how low enrollment numbers affected their programs and course offerings. If community donations were an important and inequitably distributed resource for Rivertown schools, then enrollment more so. All three schools experienced adjustments, and students often spoke of struggles associated with attending smaller high schools, ranging from reduced curricular options to class scheduling difficulties, to challenges with building up extra-curricular programs under new faculty leadership. Having several hundred fewer students than the integrated schools made it far more difficult for West to offer or establish programs by comparison. This had implications for the variety and type of educational opportunities West HS could offer students, but this fed into the meaning of the restructuring in profound ways.

Although school leaders had argued that smaller high schools would benefit students, this did not mean they would structure the smaller high schools using small schools models. Rather, leadership promised that all three new schools would continue as comprehensive schools that offered the same courses as the former West, to the extent possible--certainly the same courses across the schools. Special exceptions were the Jr. ROTC program and courses related to the IB diploma program, which remained at West.

Smaller enrollments with fewer teacher units obviously made it hard for some courses to make. Scheduling conflicts came up more frequently with fewer sections offered for courses or when not enough students signed up to justify having an extra small course because of the reciprocal effect of causing excessively large class sizes elsewhere due to student displacement. Extracurricular activities were also affected in terms of teacher availability for sponsorships and numbers of student participants, notwithstanding the often needed monetary resources the smaller community had to supply. While all three schools would be affected by these constraints to some degree, West High's extra small enrollment exaggerated these problems, resulting in far more barriers to course offerings and extracurricular activities; often they just did not exist, though not by any fault or lack on the part of students.

West students frequently commented on the need for more teachers to alleviate scheduling problems or to provide courses they needed. They hoped to undo having combined levels of students (e.g., assigning AP, Advanced, and IB students to the same class), which now were necessary to be able to offer college track courses. They noticed difficulties to start or build community supported programs that were established at the other schools. Smaller schools, then, posed problems for funding and other important supports for programs within a comprehensive school arrangement. This conspired against West to a much greater degree, as

the very programs that could have attracted students to the school—and did attract students to the other schools, remained beyond reach.

*Smallness Matters: Enrollment, Choice, and Opportunity*

The smaller number of students enrolled at West HS was interpreted by students through the lens of a historical and present reality of racial inequality that transpired across the local public schools. Specifically, the structural effect of the unitary status zone lines that created an extra small West HS was not well known because its enrollment just followed that of the already existing all Black middle school. The zone lines designed to help the system attain unitary status were drawn previous to creating the three separate middle schools. Under these lines, Black students were borrowed from the West Side to partially desegregate what would have otherwise been all White or majority White elementary schools. This busing took students from the predominately Black area of the city to the predominately White area—so Black students traveled extensively to integrate White elementary schools. Borrowing these students, though, resulted in a west area middle school that was close to half the size of the other two middle schools. Over time, attrition out of west area schools increased as parents sought to avoid sending their children to an all-Black middle school that had the lowest test scores and whose image suffered from problems stereotypical of predominately Black urban schools. The new West High's enrollment followed its extra small feeder middle school to become an extra small high school. At times, when West High's smallness was referenced by participants, they followed the logic that families did not want to send their children to a Black middle school or a Black high school. Several years after the restructured high schools were in place, the Mayor commented in a public presentation that there had been a general population shift in the city, and

that approximately two hundred families had moved<sup>23</sup> out of the West Side. By the second year after creating the all Black middle school, enrollments for the West Side elementary schools had declined by 200 as these students shifted to attend schools in the north and east sectors of the city.

The idea that people wanted to avoid West and its middle school reinforced the negative perception of West students in general and a negative perception the West adolescents detected about themselves in particular. They heard the stereotypic rhetoric about how bad they (the West Side Black kids) were, which helped them to explain why their school remained so small. Enrollment, in their understanding, reflected wanting to be a part of a school. West High's smallness, then, reinforced the idea that West Side students had been separated out from the others and were the unwanted or bad students. School leaders underestimated the extent to which individual and institutional racism would influence the students' understanding of the new school arrangement of an all Black high school that was extra small where the premise for creating multiple schools was to attract students (especially from White, private school families) into the system.

Students' responses to the enrollment dilemma indicated their perception that to some extent, schools were chosen as opposed to being assigned. They offered the following explanations: the use of fake addresses by peers, adherence by school leaders to parental demands, permission to opt out of busing, the fact that people could move, and the No Child Left

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<sup>23</sup> Under the Hope VI grant the city received, the housing project next to the all Black middle school was being demolished and rebuilt. These residents were relocated into Section 8 housing across the city, as they were guaranteed housing during the displacement. The demolitions were done in stages, though there would also be a great reduction of replacement housing. The new project would change from 232 units to 129 total units, thus helping to reduce areas of concentrated poverty. This would not explain all of the later attrition, but may account for some families moving to other zones.



Behind (NCLB) Act transfer policy. Most of these undermined the stringency of zone lines, but this led West students to understand that if choice was so open, then West HS had to be the school students chose not to attend. In what follows, indicators of choice that students discussed are presented. These do not explain why they believed people avoided West High, as that is a complex phenomenon treated in detail in the third data area on school image. Their discussions on getting to a school of choice, rather, serve to demonstrate the extent to which students understood that options could override zone lines, thus affecting enrollment numbers.

### *Fake Addresses*

West students often spoke of students “leaving” their school because this was how the restructuring happened; students attending the two new schools *left* the old West High’s western campus, while students residing on the West Side of the city remained there. To explain their extra small enrollment, some West students believed that students who should have remained at West left to attend another high school, mainly due to the attraction of a new building. Several thought some of those students would return when their school was built, so coming back became a contradictory show of loyalty to the new West—they left to avoid the old building, but would return when it was the newest. This, however, provides an idea of the extent to which they believed students could select a school.

Students were well-versed in the second address strategy to attend a preferred school. Most students knew that peers did this or even knew of peers or neighbors who had successfully pulled this off. In one group, several students admitted their families had done this to send them to schools they believed were educationally better than those on the West Side, W28FSr: [referring to a peer’s second home] “Yeah—it’s just another address. An empty house with a address! That’s all they need.” The peer had explained that her family rented a home they did

not live in to get her into the northern schools, a strategy that foiled in her junior year. Another student had done this for many years, however, and continued to receive mail at her grandmother's house that someone else had purchased:

WC1FSr: So, my grandmother died my ninth grade year. And so by then, me and my mama had already moved to our house out there—where I'm supposed to be out in the county schools! [bursts into laughter] So—and we ended up selling my grandmother's house. So, I still have mail that gets sent there, though somebody else lives there. Just like—my mom just went over there and picked up things the school sent me the other day.

Such practices suggested to students an element of choice available for selecting a school. At will one could use a relative's address to flee their zone and at will one could return to the new West High. Students offered that parents did not want their children attending all Black schools so used ways to get them into the integrated schools, something they knew undermined West High's enrollment. Students also knew the second address strategy might be discovered. One student observed a neighbor who had successfully used a fake address for years get "sent back" when she became a disciplinary problem. There were ways to override a building assignment and attend a different school, though students also knew there was no guarantee it would last. Most students obeyed the zone lines, yet the use of false addresses to flee West HS helped to explain their low enrollment.

### *Parental Insistence*

Other stories supported students' belief that school assignment could be overridden in special ways. While school board reports from the demographer in 2006 indicated far more

transfers<sup>24</sup> into West High than the other two high schools, I highlight again that this study is not to analyze the extent to which student impressions about the enrollment discrepancies were true. Rather, it is to elucidate how they interpreted West High's extra small enrollment within the context of an increasingly segregated race- and class-based school system. One West senior, for example, offered his discovery that adherence to zone lines was not required of everyone. A White student he met at a youth leadership summit shared with him her enrollment experience with the city schools:

W29MSr: I met this girl—because she goes to the [names a private school in city]. And we got to talking because she was asking me—when she realized that I lived in Rivertown—she got to asking me about the situation of the schools. And then she told me about how she lives in West's zone place. And she's a Caucasian girl. So she was telling me about how her parents went to the city school board to see about, if she—what they would need to do for her to get in to the public school. And they told her that if she wanted to come to—if she wanted to get into public school, she would not have to go to West because she's a minority here. And the city school board or officer told her that. And she felt like that was racist for somebody to sit there and tell her that she doesn't have to go to West *because* she's White.

Such exchanges with peers led West HS students to understand that perhaps their school was not quite equal with the other two. This conversation provided him with some insight as to how zoning operated for the school system. Although this White peer lived in the West HS zone,

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<sup>24</sup> See Kelley Carey, "Recommendations for Student Assignment and Facilities Planning," April 12, 2006. In the demographer's report for the system, enrollment data for the school year 2005 - 2006 was used to create transfer charts of the high schools. West HS had the most transfers in, with 66 students from North High and 22 from East High (p. 45). After subtracting transfers out, West HS had more than double the net number of transfers in (39) than East High (18). After accounting for transfers in, North High had a net loss of 67 students.

school leaders offered her parents a choice of any school she wished to attend in the system. But given the choice to attend the other two integrated and well funded high schools, it was unlikely that West High would be a school of choice for incoming students.

East HS students likewise knew of students who had successfully switched out of East High to attend North High through the parental insistence that White and or middle class parents could often wield, B2MJr: “If parents put up a big enough fuss you can pretty much go I think. I’m pretty sure—if your parents put a big enough fuss—you can go wherever you want...I’m pretty sure.” Several of their peers, they explained, now went to North HS, even though they still lived in the East HS zone. They were not sure how this was done, but to some extent students believed that parents could insist on getting a child into a preferred school.

The idea of parental preference led another student to reason why parents would not send a child to West HS. Some students attempted to explain why peers’ and friends’ families seemed to prefer the other two schools:

W10FSr: I know everybody in here has a friend that goes to either East HS or North HS. And you know, I hear some people that want to go here, too, but their parents just think that it’s better for them to go to East HS and North HS because it’s more diverse. To me it really don’t make a difference right now. It would—I mean it’s nice—[stops and softens her tone] We have White people come here too. We love White people! You know? And—I don’t have a problem. We—we *want* other people here. [Peers agree in background] I just don’t understand why they did—how they just split us up that made it seem that way.

Despite their friends wanting to come to West, what was frustrating for West students was that they understood why parents would want to send their children to schools that were diverse

rather than an all Black school. They wanted diversity too. This was why the restructuring was so unfair. Some said they had attended elementary and middle schools in the other zones, in part, for that very reason. The undesirability of a racially isolated West HS made students question why the schools were split in a way that made one unattractive to parents while undermining diversity for some students—certainly not their preference.

### *Transfers as Choice*

Several students pursued other contradictions apparent with choice despite zone lines. Personal experience informed students that someone could work around as well as with the system to attend a preferred school:

W30FJr: And half of us not even really zoned for this side of town—it's just we need to stay—just a little tab on to the zoning and you really have to go over to North--[self corrects] –I mean West just because you stayed in between North HS and West HS zoning like I do. I stay on [gives address]. I'm really zoned for North HS, but I stay down the road from West HS so therefore they let me—I went to West . . . So if you just stay in a little bitty little piece of the zone you—it's hard for them to want to place you somewhere. They give you the ultimatum to pick out where you want to go. So I had the choice to stay where I wanted to go. So I chose West HS.

Students did have some legitimate choices open to them. West Side Black students zoned for the other schools could opt to not bus and instead attend school closer to their home on the West Side, as this student (and several others) did. As already mentioned, according to the 2005-2006 data in a report by the demographer hired to help devise new zone lines, West HS actually had the most transfers in of the three high schools that school year. In other words, some West Side

students chose to attend their neighborhood high school rather than bus to another one. To the students, then, zone lines were not as fixed as people thought.

### *No Child Left Behind*

A special case with getting around zone lines came through the NCLB transfer policy. West students knew that their low enrollment made it difficult for them to offer programs to the degree the other two schools could. Yet students often stated their preference to attend West HS. One important way West High was marked as less, however, was that it had not made Annual Yearly Progress<sup>25</sup> (AYP). The students received transfer letters at the beginning of the school year allowing them to move to one of the other two high schools, both of which had made AYP. As West students talked about this, they pointed out that the transfer release further undermined their school because low enrollment already made curricular options so precarious:

W12FJr: I didn't even give it [the transfer letter] to my parents.

W10FJr: It was like, when I read the letter, and they was like, "You have the option of either going to North High or East High" . . . I just *looked* at the letter. I'm like, "They're not sending me to—" [hits hands flat against desk]. How in the world do they imagine the attendance rate to go up if they're offering for people to go to other high schools? That's just going to try to keep West down! That's how I saw it. So I'm like—"Uh uh. Garbage."

These students believed the transfer option presented to them under NCLB was illogical.

Leaving West HS would not resolve the problems their school faced with an enrollment that was

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<sup>25</sup> The results they referred to were from the 2004 - 2005 reports, as this interview was in February 2006. They knew this was due to missing the attendance and reading requirements. Still, students believed missing AYP was not a true indicator that their school's scholastics were less, as they felt they had been given many of the best experienced teachers in the system.

already too small. If they left, the school would be worse off. Finding ways to meet the attendance requirement made more sense to them:

W12FSo: Instead of giving us the option to run away from it, they should've been trying to fix it--because it don't make no sense if we leave. That's not going to change the problem.

W10FSo and W12FSo: [chorally] That's not going to make it any better.

W12FSo: And it's—they sent the letter out to the wrong people. *We need* [her emphasis] to be here!

W10FSo: They need to send some of them over here, hoping for the chance that the attendance rate'll go up . . . That would've made more sense than telling us to leave here.

These students were active in many extracurricular activities and felt that getting more students at their school was crucial to making their school succeed, especially in the midst of negative views of West. They reacted to the NCLB transfer letters as something contrived to undermine West HS--people would want to see West fail. For them, leaving would cause more harm. Other students argued along a similar line—abandonment would not help West High:

W22FJr: Yeah—another reason why we could choose pretty much what school we want to go to is because we didn't pass the AYP. And I know we got a letter in the mail saying—they list what we failed and what we passed and if you want to change your children's—your school—you can do so at this time . . . But, I mean, you don't leave something because it's falling . . . You should try to stay and help make it better. I mean, we all in the advanced classes so I feel like we the leaders of the school. Therefore if we leave the school, the school would eventually get shut down.

The school needed people, especially students in the college track curriculum who were diligent with studies. They had the choice to leave, but many students<sup>26</sup> wanted West High to succeed. Improving their school could attract more students, leaving it would do the opposite.

### *Moving*

Some students knew of peers who had the resources to move, which was the extreme case (not as common, but still a possibility) of selecting or avoiding a school:

E2MJr: Like, we had this one friend we were just talking about and his parents—they were moving him to a new house and like, the majority of the reason why they chose the location and so he was saying they did--they wanted him to go to North High. And that's what he was telling us. He was like, "Yeah, they're looking at houses over here because they really want—they want me to go to this school." And so . . . families—in each individual way—there's lots of different ways to do it, but families end up picking and choosing what schools their kids go to. And then you can end up falling back in the same line of just having all the funding in one school or having all the White kids in one school and all the Black kids in one school, or—and it all just—the zoning doesn't mean anything anymore.

Even to students, zone lines were not restrictive and had little meaning if people could get around them in so many ways. Neighborhood high schools divided by race and class could certainly resegregate an entire school system. It would also promote inequality, as this student indicated, because the people with more resources were the ones who could move, thus concentrating wealth in certain schools while leaving others with less.

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<sup>26</sup> See, Kelley Carey's, "Recommendation for Student Assignment and Facilities Planning," (April 12, 2006, p. 46). According to the demographer's report on transfers for that school year, there were only six transfers from West HS to another high school due to NCLB.



Some students paid attention to enrollment as a measure of success, and North HS talked about their school attracting students from private and county schools. According to them, many peers transferred to their feeder middle with the goal of attending North HS or transferred directly to North HS when it opened. One participant shared his experience of transferring from a private school:

N1MSr: I wasn't really happy at [names private school]. So, when they—the mention of the new school—before they even decided where they were going to be—just the idea that there would be new facilities and that kind of stuff was one of the reasons that I did move to [north middle school] in the first place . . . . They hadn't built anything yet.

Transfers into the system had been a goal, according to the May 2000 Restructuring Committee report, where it was hoped that the creation of a school competitive with the private schools would draw these students. West students, likewise, provided anecdotes of families coming from poorer surrounding counties to attend a new school in Rivertown, which succeeded in attracting students into the system even from places beyond the local. Still, West students noticed that the new families they met gravitated to East HS or North HS, often stating that they did not want their children attending West HS, something that will be examined more in the data area on school image.

Students, then, understood that zone lines were not entirely limiting. They knew there were ways to get around a building assignment. Students heard stories about or knew of peers or neighbors who had somehow found a way to attend a school other than the one for which they were originally zoned. Choice, however, then indicated a type of hierarchy for the schools as this would clearly designate which schools students avoided and which they preferred to attend.

Some students noticed that being zoned to a school did not mean they necessarily fit in or were wanted, so a hidden facet of choice was the sense of belonging. Even if teachers I spoke with believed this had happened to some students who returned to West HS, very few students actually expressed this. It surfaced in a powerful way, however, in one special instance. I met several West Side students through a friend's daughter as they waited to catch their bus to North HS. I talked about the research project and invited them to participate in the study. Only three students ultimately took up the invitation, but I never knew what had triggered a reluctance on the part of the others who had initially expressed interest in participating. Months later I ran into their bus driver and she relayed why they had opted out. The day after inviting the students to participate in the study, one male student stood in the aisle of the bus and gave a speech stating that West Side students were not wanted at North High. He said they were being used so that they could build a school in the northern part of the city and that it was hopeless to ever expect this new version of racial subordination to change. "Things will *never* change!" he stated, according to the bus driver. Blacks neither belonged nor were wanted at North High and they knew it. This bus driver expressed shock at the degree of hopelessness this youth expressed. As she later explained, he said that participating in an interview would not change anything (field notes, fall 2006).

Through the lens of choice, then, students understood that zone lines were not entirely limiting. They knew there were ways to get around a building assignment. Although students talked about choice on an individual basis, the product of school enrollment numbers led to a different meaning. Programs were affected by enrollment, but enrollment, in turn could be influenced by what programs a school offered. In this manner, West students scrutinized the

consequences enrollment numbers had for the schools, which is presented in the following subsection.

### *Consequences of Low Enrollment*

While students knew that enrollment was affected to some extent by choice, the West HS students were aware of the grave problems created by their extra small enrollment. The consequences of a low enrollment included in this data subsection are (1) losses of courses and electives, (2) dwindling possibilities to pursue a college track curriculum, (3) greater difficulty to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) under NCLB, (4) lost opportunities as resources shifted to the integrated schools, and (5) some effects of having fewer teacher sponsors.

#### *Fewer course options.*

West students continually focused on the problems their school faced, not the least of which was resources. By concentrating on getting a new building, however, many felt that some of the other important difficulties they faced, specifically with regard to quality of education, were being ignored or missed. The problem of not having enough teachers often surfaced as students talked about the difficulties they had with fewer course options. They knew this was related to their low enrollment—something at least a few hoped would be corrected with the pending rezoning:

W25FSr: While they're so busy worried about a *building* [her emphasis] they need to be trying to check to see if we gonna have the right—enough computers, enough books and stuff, enough teachers—while they're worried about a building.

W3FSr: Enough students.

W31FSr: Yes! Rezoning!

Students offered consequences of West High's smallness to argue that the current structure worked against them. This went beyond the difficulties of not having a new building, and even the many material lacks they felt. They analyzed this as they examined how the schools had been created in the first place.

The degree to which the schools experienced problems with fewer course offerings and scheduling varied greatly across the schools. As one North student explained, he was able to get all of the AP courses he wanted to take—"No problem." A few East students admitted having struggles with course scheduling, though none said they could not get into advanced level courses or that they lost out on getting a college diploma. In contrast, West students often enumerated difficulties that undermined their course options, or those of their peers. That West HS had to combine courses to be able to offer a dwindling set of choices was often mentioned by students who had to take combined courses for AP/Advanced/IB offerings, math, and electives. In the case of combined advanced level math courses, for example, students complained of working at too slow a pace or were admittedly lost because of missing the prerequisite course. On a more serious note and something one freshman noted with alarm, only split math classes for algebra and geometry were offered—a factor that could jeopardize getting an Advanced Diploma if core courses they needed to take later locked them out of the remaining higher math requirements. All of these concerns came up in relation to West High's enrollment size, which was now a primary focus of concern for them. Far fewer course options and possibilities were an integral part of the new arrangement for West HS.

West students commented quite frequently on how their extra small faculty affected their choices in courses—something they knew was related to enrollment size. The smaller schools, it turns out, worked against them:

W2MSr: Like the one advantage that we said they were going to have with, you know, being able to have the smaller classes and all of that, is that it's going to make a *disadvantage* [emphasizes "disadvantage"] because they've taken too many teachers away. We have huge classes. . . . So it's like—we have limited resources and they're just overcrowding, overcrowding, and overcrowding. So what was supposed to be an advantage has now become a disadvantage to us.

This student spoke in reference to the smaller schools' arrangement that he and others believed had been designed to alleviate overcrowded classes. Ironically, the smaller enrollments caused overcrowding as courses were combined or as a smaller enrollment to be able to offer one course within the extra small school meant higher than normal class sizes elsewhere to balance out its lower teacher to student ratio.

One would be amiss to only consider this aspect of enrollment in isolation, however, as it does not provide an understanding of what the social context that created and maintained these conditions ultimately meant to students. West students knew and discussed many of the justifications put forth to split the former West, and these were tied to the problems with enrollment they now faced:

W31FSr: I guess they seen that more minorities were in there than like Whites or whatever and they was trying to prevent White flight. And basically when they did split it up—is you did see enrollment increase—which was I guess what they wanted to.

This student went to North HS for two years, and had witnessed the influx of private school students. Other participants were aware of this and admitted that the plan had worked. But only North HS and East HS received the influx of students—West did not. One student questioned

the goals of leadership, given the gross inequity in curricular opportunity that resulted from this arrangement:

W2MSr: Like, you saw predominantly the more affluent people leave the public school systems and go to private schools. And they were trying—I guess they were trying to stop that by building those two new schools and restructuring in those areas where there—there is some affluence. It was kind of a mixture of distribution of income . . . It seems like you're trying to pander to one base instead of trying to give everyone an equal education. You're going to kind of cherry pick—who gets the best of the best and—the leftovers will go to West.

Leaders would be interested in attracting the best students, who would then attend the other two schools. Students leaving the system were the priority, not students the system served, and certainly not the leftovers who lived on the West Side. The students regarded as less would go to West and would not receive a comparable education. He and other students wove in a complex picture as they discussed how the schools ended up.

West students believed their extra small school meant they were neither a priority for leaders nor was their school as important as the other schools that needed to be guarded to ensure that they took good care of incoming families. As the above responses indicated, West would also remain in a lower status, as it seemingly could not attract students into the system, at least the type of students the system was seeking. These students faced numerous hurdles with course options, most of which cannot be documented here for lack of room, but these experiences made them sensitive to any loss of resources, especially instructional, for their school.

*College track compromised.*

Students were greatly aware that their low status led to their low enrollment. This had serious consequences for academic opportunity—a low enrollment meant fewer teachers, which affected scheduling and availability for course offerings, leaving students vulnerable to getting locked out of obtaining the college track diploma:

W3FSr: Depending on your enrollment at your school, it depends on how many classes you have and how many teachers you have. And that limits the students a lot. . . . 'Cause one student is even in a bind that because she needs her advanced diploma--to get this diploma—the science class she needs to take takes place the same time the social studies class she needs to take. So the classes like that are in a bind, and—I feel that the way they redid it, and the way, because of our enrollment we had to cut classes and take teachers.

Students traced many of their curricular dilemmas back to their extra small enrollment. This fed into a series of difficulties for students to access curriculum, especially that of college track. Since enrollment determined the number of teachers, the problems were circular and only worsened for West in that it could not compete with the offerings at the other two schools.

*Test scores and AYP.*

West High's size meant a lower status, though test scores affected their status, which one student suggested played an important role in the allocation of instructional resources:

W2MSr: I think that we're not given a lot of priority because of testing—test scores. What they really don't want you to know is they're really big on test scores because if you look at the other two high schools, it seems like the district and the zoning—it was done mainly to improve test scores. That's what they're about. Because I notice that

schools that did a lot better on test scores—they got a lot more resources. Because my little elementary school was a magnet school [names magnet school] and we did very well on our test scores, so we got like a lot of money for funding and all that while *other* schools—like the ones y’all [turns to look at classmates] went to—they didn’t hardly get anything. Because I know that a few schools that didn’t get like, any more money from the next year. And we started actually getting money from their budget because we were doing well on test scores and like, we were getting a lot of *positive publicity* [his emphasis] for the Rivertown City School System. It seems like they’re all about the test scores and how their image is, and not actually about giving all the students a world class education, as their motto states.

He understood the ultimate goal of leadership—the high schools had been configured to raise test scores. This functioned for two of the city’s high schools, though not for West. Experience led him to believe West would then not receive as much in the way of instructional resources, contributing to their many difficulties and reinforcing a spiral-down fashion of other important resources. Like the hierarchy he witnessed with his magnet school, he believed this now happened with the high schools.

For most students at West it was common knowledge that their test scores were the lowest of the three high schools and some responded to this at its simplest level—this would make people avoid their school. Students saw that low performance on tests meant less investment in students on the part of leadership, however, contradicting the system’s mission statement of opportunity for everyone. Test score status had its logic, but this would then keep West in a lower place as they were abandoned by leaders:



W3FSr: If you are like a lower standing school, it's like you really are looked down upon. But to me you're the one that really needs the—the most help.

W2MSr: [softly] It's a stigma against you. . . . When you go to that school it's like a Black mark.

Just as important as the loss of resources, and something the West HS students realized, was that their school had been marked as less and this would work against them.

Students saw through the restructuring—it had created a school that with great difficulty would succeed. One student pointed out that because of its extra small size the low performance that had always taken place was now more noticeable with the restructuring. With fewer students at West, the low performance that had been camouflaged in the former big West was now exposed. But this damaged West HS while the other two schools enjoyed higher rankings because of how the schools had been split:

W5FSr: You know how they would rank your school as who's doing bad and the percentage that's doing good. Now they look at West as everyone over here is doing bad. But the only reason it seems like that is because we had more people here—before. And you can always see—[if] it's a lot of people here, of course it's going to more doing good than doing bad. But now all they see is that kids is doing bad because—[changes voice tone] They *been* doing bad! You just wasn't able to see it because there was a lot of people here. So I think it makes us look really bad because it's not a lot of people, and they always try and rate who's doing good and who's doing bad and who be in the most trouble.

Students knew the test score composite of the three schools proceeded from the old West. And low test scores had always been present, but now were more noticeable in their smaller school.

West's small size worked against it, making it the low ranking school. Being marked as the low status school was disturbing, but students detected reasons as to why their low status position would remain—the institutional arrangement created problems with enrollment that made it beyond their reach to get the resources they needed to succeed.

*Lost Opportunities.*<sup>27</sup>

Several high achieving West participants had expected to be able to co-op, a curricular option that allowed them to intern part of the day with a business. Pursuing an advanced diploma now precluded this experience for some seniors due to scheduling constraints. They expressed concern as they watched valuable opportunities shift to the other larger schools:

W2MSr: Like, when we do get a, a rare job, like it was one working for the federal government doing something with bankruptcy. And she really tried to give that job to someone and she eventually had to give it up. And that's, you know, like the story of West. Every time there's a really good job, we have to give it up to another school because we can't do it because it's a constraint on the schedule because we have too little teachers. So it's just a big lack of resources that just snowballs.

The tragedy of the constraints precipitated by the low enrollment over time was that the losses of programs and the lack of recognitions because they could not participate would all be read by the greater community as a fact that West and its students actually were less, disappointments aside. These instances all fed back into creating West HS as a school that would not be one of choice.

The dilemma they encountered was how to make West HS a school people would want to attend

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<sup>27</sup> While this intersects with curricular features, the students were really pointing to a complex web of lost opportunities that occurred with their extra small enrollment. These consequences reinforced one another, leaving the students strangled within the confines a shrinking set of curricular options. The co-op program allowed students to intern part of the day outside of the school, but seniors who hoped to do this could not get around schedules for their core academic courses. It was frustrating to see such opportunities shift to the larger schools.

if they were closed out of course offerings that would show the community they were motivated students pursuing good activities. Students took on this burden, when the focus for leadership should have been how to ensure they had the opportunities that others had. Though students lamented their losses, these paled by comparison as they considered how their school would appear to others—as less. It was not just individual opportunity, it was how they collectively took on West High’s image, one for which they felt responsible.

*Teacher sponsors.*

Part of West High’s smaller enrollment was tied to its lower status. Students noticed, for example, that their school’s honor students remained unreported—something that would only reinforce their lower status to the entire community. Although student grades were typically reported to the paper through a faculty sponsor, West’s extra small faculty took on multiple roles to fill in the many types of sponsorships. And in this case, West High’s grades were not reported. Community members would notice this absence in academic recognitions published in the local newspaper, which, based on the following participant’s grades, she should have received:

W124FJr: Like my Grandma. People her age....They look in the newspaper and they see North HS and East HS. My grandmamma will want to know why West HS ain’t in the newspaper. “Well, you may have all As on your report card, why y’all not even in the newspaper?”

Students were aware that the absence in recognitions reflected West HS, not just to their families, but to the greater community. This fed into how peers viewed academics at West—they, too, believed what they heard about West’s GPAs was true, remarking that overall, West students were not as academically engaged as students at their schools. The community might be

unaware of its extra small enrollment, but the absence of reportage of academically successful West students could be interpreted by a wider audience viewing West HS students as academically unmotivated and deficient, something students felt marked the entire school negatively.

### *Summary of Resources*

While students at the integrated schools knew West HS students would eventually get a new building, few realized the effects the three-year delay had on West High's programs. The building timeline held great significance for West HS students. Unwittingly, West students interpreted the building lags as evidence that they were regarded as less by school and community leaders. West seniors specifically noted the necessity of their involvement in the walkout to hasten a resolution to the delays. But unlike the case for the two new schools, the delays still prompted debate in the community as to whether the West students would take care of a new building. What started to emerge was the image of West HS through the question of whether those students deserved a new building.

Students understood that the building demographics and location had a great affect on community funding, which in turn, affected programs. In this way, West students saw that they were disadvantaged, but this also led them to believe they were not the students people in the community would support like those attending the other two schools. Enrollment size was important for participation rates, though both this and funding affected whether schools even had certain programs. Programs were interpreted as indicators of the school's progress and success—something that would further drive enrollment choices. In these ways, distinct aspects of resources, including the facilities, community funding, and enrollment sizes, all served to distinguish the degree to which they would become schools of choice that would attract and

retain students. All of these aspects of resource allocation signaled to West students that they were regarded as “less” while their outcomes sent the message that West HS was not as good as the other two schools.

West students traced many curricular and extracurricular problems they experienced back to the low enrollment, which surfaced contradictions about zoning restrictions. If school choice operated, which many believed, then their low enrollment indicated that they were less because other students, especially White, did not choose to attend their school. Despite zone restrictions, some provided examples of peers (though this could have included relatives) they knew of who would probably switch to the new West HS once it was completed as though this were easy to do. Much of the fact of school assignment then, in their minds, was still a matter of choice.

The West students saw the effect their low enrollment had on access to learning opportunities. Their much smaller faculty limited numerous aspects of their education. Unlike the other two schools, they saw their smaller school size and attendant problems as a consequence of community abandonment and a lower respect for West students. This was complex, as students tied together many characteristics of the restructuring in chain effect fashion to explain an educational context that was far less than what their peers had at the other schools, but that prevented them from becoming as good as the other two schools so that others would choose to attend West High. As students tried to resolve the problem of low enrollment, it led them to explanations for why other students, especially Whites, might not choose to attend their school. And in their attempts to alter their enrollment pattern, a complex weave of the social text surfaced, which had much to do with the images of the schools the new arrangement had constructed.

## Image: Discipline, Safety, and Media Bias

West students detected many ways in which they were not equal to the other two schools in terms of resources necessary to succeed. Though they could not make money magically appear, they did feel that in some ways they could work to improve their low enrollment. And if they could attract enough students, this could positively impact many programs, thus helping the school's status. It disturbed West students greatly that more peers did not enroll, especially White. As they assessed the restructuring, they tried to explain why the reluctance to enroll at their school. For most students, this had an easy answer—one that in their experience was far too familiar (if not painful) to them. The image of West was a barrier regardless of what they did or did not do—they would always be thought of as the bad Black kids on the West Side. What follows is a data section that unravels the intricacies of how they believed this image attached itself to their school, and includes the sub-areas of (1) safety, (2) discipline, and (3) media bias. To elucidate how the West High students became bad Black kids it is necessary to first present a special category that marked them, as it was this term that students attempted to explain—that of being considered a ghetto school.

### *Introduction to “Ghetto West”*

The image of the schools came through in numerous student responses, especially from West participants. One large category in this data section was West High's purported reputation of being a wild, dangerous place. Though West students heard much commentary in the community on how they were perceived, possibly one of the most hurtful ones was the idea that West High was a ghetto school:

Interviewer: [probing further] You actually heard the term “ghetto school”?

W14MFr: Everybody said that. “Ghetto West.” “Ghetto West.” That kind of hurt my feelings, you know?

Interviewer: Why do they say something like that?

W14MFr: ‘Cause how old our school looks and there—our population of Black people. You know. We don’t have any White people here, then so we’ve got to be ghetto ‘cause we Black. . . . [W]e on the *West Side*.”

Being assigned to the old building along with the demographic composition of the school in a racially isolated area automatically made their school a “ghetto” school. An all Black school more than an old building signaled this—Blacks in the old building made it a ghetto school because Blacks were less. When Whites attended the same building, it did not really retain this image. It seemed hard to separate their lower caste status from the concept of ghetto, as this reflected their neighborhood as well. Still, West students resisted this image when out in the community, not just as West HS students collectively, but as individuals:

W5FSr: Where I go to church, it’s girls that go to North MS and, like, to East MS, and they were asking me what school I go to. And when I told them about West they were just like, “Well, I wouldn’t want to go there because it’s ghetto,” and things like that. But . . . I explained to them just because it’s on the West Side and you know—the whole West Side is not bad and West is not bad. I mean, I go to West. And I was like, “I make good grades and I’m a well-known student and I’m in a lot of stuff.” And I was like, “You don’t think I’m ghetto, do you?” They were like, “No, but you know, a lot of people talk about West.” And they was like, “It’s bad” and things like that—people that don’t even go here. You just see it’s predominantly Black and you just think that we’re wild and things like that.

Her peers attended the two integrated middle schools. Their first reaction to West HS was that it was a ghetto school they would not want to attend even though she did not seem to fit this stereotype. The West student attributed this image to her school's location on the West Side. This meant West was perceived by its area of the city, though she pointed out that a predominately Black school would quickly lead outsiders to assume that all its students were wild. This student realized that by attending West HS, she was automatically marked as "ghetto" because West HS was the bad school.

Another student offered that West was automatically viewed as a bad school because it was surrounded by the city's housing projects, so parents would not want to send their kids there. Public housing projects led people to assume that the West students were bad:

W32FFr: I was just saying, maybe because of what we're surrounded by, 'cause we're surrounded by a lot of the projects or whatever you want to or however you want to quote it or whatever. 'Cause, I don't know, maybe because of that. I'm not sure, but I know that basically when—'cause I have relatives who go to East High and North High, like I said. And when they talk about West, it's like, "I'm not going to send my child up there," because we're bad or whatever.

The area of the city where their school was located led to many stereotypes about West students. People seemed to automatically think West students were bad simply because they attended a school located in proximity to the housing projects.

Frequently, students heard that parents would not send their children to West or West MS because they believed that behavior was wild and unrestrained:

W33MFr: Yeah, just because the events, because—it's just the same as West MS. I have heard some people say that they're not going to send their child over there at West MS or



at West HS because West HS and West MS—they fight too much or they ghetto, or something like that. And just because a majority of the kids are Black doesn't mean basically that we're going to get into more trouble over here. Because last year when I was at West Middle School they told us that we used to get the most write-ups and all this other stuff but, when the results and stuff came back—North and East middle schools used to get in trouble more than we did. They had more suspensions, more write-ups, and all that other stuff.

As this young student indicated, the school location on the West Side led to stereotypes about the West Side students. At times, students referred to events in the area from years past, including crime or the bad reputation of the former West's western campus to explain the image the new West and even West MS had inherited. Still, the easiest stereotype of wildness was that they were all Black schools and this alone would cause parents to avoid their schools. He refuted the bad reputation with evidence from write-ups, but that did not seem to lessen their stereotyped image of being bad.

### *“Bad Black Kids”*

Images of the schools were nested within the context of geography, but were reinforced by perceptions based on the racial composition of the school. West students made fierce attempts to erase the label of ghetto ascribed to them and to their school. They found that ghetto was a key term used synonymously with “West Side,” which identified who the “bad, Black kids” were more specifically. Black meant bad, and according to the students, an *all* Black school indicated that everyone would suppose that behavior would be the worst—hinting at degrees of badness with Blackness. The image of bad behavior was what marked the West

students collectively and individually regardless of how they behaved or how well they did academically.

In the following, several students identified people's labels of them—bad, Black, and West Side, to explain the negative perception of their school:

W12FJr: They picked up a murderer from East High and they picked up—they had a stabbing AT [emphasizes “at”] North High.

W34MJr: [laughs, then softly comments] And they talk about West.

W12FJr: Yeah, and they talk about West. It's so bad. It happens everywhere, but they just walk into West and then, you know, the bad people—we on the West Side and it's a BLACK (student's emphasis) community.

West students understood they all were regarded by the wider community as bad Black kids on the West Side, which distinguished them from the other students in the system. Geographic region, intertwined with race, signaled that West was automatically marked as a bad school. As these students suggested, the image of bad never stuck to the two schools where students with violent behaviors had been arrested, while West, without such incidents or any arrests, was considered the bad school because of its demographics, as the following sub-areas of data will reveal in greater detail.

### *Safety*

West HS students spent a great deal of time discussing what the label “ghetto” meant, precipitating commentary on serious incidents that had occurred at two of the schools. This data sub-area of safety became a significant source of meaning by how it constructed the school images. Importantly, the meaning of the restructuring refracted in unexpected ways through student remarks about dangerous incidents that had taken place. Student participants from all

three schools compared the schools by discussing several major events that had taken place since their opening in the fall of 2003, but there were important contrasts in their analyses of them that shed light on how the West Side students became bad Black kids. West students frequently brought up the topics of violence and fighting as they tried to explain why they had been separated out from other students, why their school enrollment continued to be so small, and why—unlike the other two schools—students with other backgrounds (race, ethnicity, and class) did not enroll in their school. Since they often heard or were confronted with commentary that labeled them as bad Black kids from the West Side and concluded that this influenced the new enrollment pattern, they attempted to refute this perception with evidence known by everyone to prove that it was unfounded. The first type of evidence they used came by comparing the degree of safety at the three schools. Students frequently argued that nothing dangerous or bad ever happened at West in great contrast to the serious events that had taken place at the other two schools:

W34MJr: Things I heard is that people—this side of town seems to get into more trouble or like to cause more incidents so to say. And, like, they try to separate people who cause things from people who don't.

W12FJr: Whatever. At North High they had a stabbing. At East High they picked up a murderer, where we might have a couple of fistfights over here. We haven't had anything drastic—like no murder suspect gets picked up at our school. And then not only did the person kill somebody, he killed a old person.

W34MJr: That's the same thing I was saying.

W12FJr: Yeah! They looking at the wrong school. They look down.

W8FJr: We just have normal school problems.

W12FJr: Yeah—they look down on West. But, if you'll just look back at the stuff that has happened since North High and East High have been built, they've had way—it's like the stuff is so more—it's just—so out there. Crazy stuff. Stabbing people. We don't stab people. We might get into a argument in the hallway.

W8FJr: Like normal school stuff.

W12FJr: Yeah. Yeah! If we do have problems with somebody, we don't—I mean that—we don't do stuff like that.

Although no dangerous incident had ever taken place at their school, West HS students associated those taking place at the other schools with their own school's negative image of danger. Their presentation of this evidence—and this was true across all West interview groups—was never put along a “we are good and they are bad” dichotomy. Rather, West students cited the bad events to show that the label of bad Black kids they purportedly were could not be erased despite the lack of evidence to support it. Whenever West HS students mentioned a serious event that occurred at the other schools, they immediately became defensive about their school image. This response pattern of defensiveness was not to explain away negative incidents at their school. The great contradiction they faced was that even with evidence that no dangerous event had happened at West HS it was still considered to be bad while the other two schools seemed insulated from a bad image despite having had serious incidents.

West HS students often cited the stabbing at North HS and the police picking up an accomplice to the murder at East HS, both of which happened during the first school year of the restructured schools. They further mentioned students with a bat and a machete, slashing tires in a school parking lot, and several other incidents—all of which had taken place at the integrated

schools. Each piece of evidence was done in defense of their school; their school was not as dangerous as the other schools even though it continued to carry this negative image by the greater community. They wondered why everyone considered them bad if there was really no evidence from school violence to back up that image of West HS.

*Discipline: The Fighting Kids*

West HS students continually heard their school distinguished as a bad place—something students frequently encountered in their conversations with people in the community and something they felt was unfair. Comparisons of the schools based upon the major negative incidents produced no evidence that could mark their school as bad, which led them to speculate that other perceptions must be influencing their image. This search often led them to another argument that was used to mark them as a bad school, which was the amount of fighting people believed took place there. This explanation continually came up in West interviews and became a powerful link in the students' explanations for a restructuring that created racially divided high schools.

With extended family and peers attending two or all three of the schools, many students drew on a network of information about the daily school events as they assessed the frequency of fighting that took place. West HS students reflected on their bad image, scrutinizing the degree to which fighting was present at their school:

W35MJr: I just have to say, just—people always talking about how bad things are over here just because they go out farther away. It's still the same, but just hearing what everybody has to say. So there's just—it gets on my nerves a little bit though. No! [laughs slightly to show he was joking, then smiles and brightens his tone] Not for me—I

really don't care, 'cause I know. I know what be goin' on here. But from there, it's just—irritating to hear.

W36FJr: People will talk. I hear people talk negatively about West a lot. But, I feel like if they don't go here, they really don't have anything to say because they don't know what goes on here just like we don't know what goes on there. So I feel like they can't judge our school.

W37MJr: [softly to cut in] There's been a lot more bad things happening at East HS and North HS than here. We really haven't had anything bad here.

W36FJr: [softly] Yeah.

W8FJr: 'Cause you haven't heard anything like

W36FJr: [cuts in] –stabbing.

W8FJr: Somebody stabbing or—somebody brought a gun to school or all this violence. Probably the worst thing that we probably had was a fight and—this whole year, well we've hardly--we probably had about one . . . which was today, and that was like, the only fight we've had this year. And last year, I mean like we probably had no more—like two or three out of the whole year. So, I mean, people just say we're bad 'cause we're Black and we're in an all Black school, but that's not really true. We're just like any other school. Each school has their problems. We're not as—bad—as people think we are, but, you know, we have our bad things.

In the above exchange, these West students expressed continual frustration at the frequency of bad reports and commentary they heard about their school. To counteract this, they enumerated the fights that had taken place that year and the previous as they weighed how much these could have marked their school as bad in the absence of any major dangerous incidents. They

concluded that the negative commentary about them was unfair, but that it continued regardless of their behavior because their school was all Black. For them, the common supposition was not only that Black was bad, an all Black school would automatically be considered bad even when nothing bad had happened. Unfortunately, this took any normal high school problems they had out of proportion. Yet, these did not seem to be what people were talking about. People seemed to believe there was continual fighting at West HS. Stranger yet, the other two schools never seemed to have negative images stick to them despite the dangerous events that had occurred at them, some of which had made the media.

In another response, one student concluded from his exchange with a peer from North HS that West's image of fighting could be directly tied its location, which fed expectations of what would take place on their West Side school:

W19MFr: I had a conversation with one of my old friends from North HS. . . . He was like, "Y'all go to West now, right?" "Ah, yeah." He was like, "Why did y'all leave [names a county high school] and go to that old raggedly school?" "It ain't how the school is, it's the people that in the school." And then they were like, "Them people over there—all they do is talk to make them want to fight." "Oh like, it ain't all about that—you come to West to find out." Like every once in a while somebody get into a argument and fight or something like that. We hear stuff about North HS and East HS every day. Somebody fighting over there *every* day [emphasizes "every"]. But then they want to give us a bad name because what side of town we on.

West students understood that part of what led people to attribute fighting to West was its location—the West Side. Even with information he had about fighting at the other two schools, he was left to defend West HS based on peers' assumptions.

Students knew that because their school was all Black, it was easy to assume that there would be fights, as one freshman explained:

W14MFr: About us being the all-Black school, you get a bad name also. Like, I asked somebody, “Well, why won’t you come to West?” “Oh, I don’t want to go to Ghetto West!” Ghetto West! This old West! They only say that because we’re a all Black school. You know, they just don’t know. We don’t have that many fights at this school. Like, I hear more stuff going down at North High and East High. Like, we might have some—have ‘em every Blue Moon, but we don’t fight every day. This school ain’t really messy. It is how you make it to be.

His immediate reaction was that “ghetto” implied fighting. One reason West students continually talked about this perception of West as a fighting schools was because they often encountered this reasoning in conversations they had with community adults about why they wouldn’t send their children to West, as another student explained:

W4FSr: I know a lady and she was from [Name] County and her—their family was planning to move to Rivertown. And she was like, “What school do you go to?” And I was like, “I go to West.” And she was like, “Oh, no! I don’t want to send my son over there. I heard there was so much stuff happening over there. I’m going to send him to East High.” . . . She was like, “And then look what side of town it sits on. It sits on the West Side—and y’all building old and they got new buildings” and all that stuff. “And they got more teachers and stuff,” she was saying.

Interviewer: Hmm. Did she say specifically why she didn’t want to send



W4FSr: She just said that because--she heard that the kids are wild. It's fights every day. And she said a lady told her that—a lady who she works with—who—doesn't even have a child over here.

This type of reaction to West HS was frustrating to West students who knew their school to be quite different from how people perceived it. Several students mentioned having conversations with adults in the community who relayed this perception of West to them like the one above. Even without these, students' complaints that they were considered to be the fighting kids were quite prevalent across interview groups. West did not have major bad incidents like the other two schools, but this did not change the bad image it seemed to retain. Strangely, and something they could not understand was that despite the violent or dangerous events that took place at the other two schools, they did not acquire a negative image like West. Students at the other two schools talked about the major incidents as well, and these responses supported the contradiction that West students found about which school was considered "bad."

#### *North High Students Speak About Violence*

North HS students recognized that given the enrollment characteristics and building locations, it was easy to "tag" each school based on preconceived notions:

N5M: I think there are problems with preconceived notions about all the schools, though.

I mean, I can go to tell you that East HS's thought of as the hillbilly redneck school.

North HS is thought of as the little Preppy—the, you know, everybody thinks we're rich.

. . . And West HS is thought of, you know, West Side school.

North HS students often defended the diversity of their school by noting its substantial poverty for a wealthy neighborhood school (about 40%) and the fact that it was no longer predominately White (just below 50%). Even still, their White population was highly successful, academically,

so carried an image of high academics as evidenced by national merit scholar winners, numerous scholarship recipients, and college attendance percentages highlighted on their school website and in the system's yearly honors publication. Still, students considered the overall division, which tended to perpetuate these labels. Even with North High's mixed student population, its location in an exclusive White and wealthy area maintained this label, rendering its poverty and Black population of little effect to outsiders, including students. The schools, then, to some extent were tagged based upon assumptions about their geographic region:

Interviewer: You said, "Well, we all know West's reputation." Could you define that for me?

N5M: Well, I hate like to go [inaudible]. I really don't necessarily feel this way, but its interpretation definitely would be into more of the "ghetto" school I guess you could say. It even had the reputation when we were there. I mean, we used to jenk ourselves. We'd think it's funny because, you know, I mean we didn't have the newest school and, I mean, it was pretty funny to us.

Here he switched from implications of undesirable behavior in his earlier remark to appearance and location of the building. White students could laugh about the old West building as they attended school together, but ghetto now took on a different meaning for West students in their all Black school. It was no longer just about an old building.

As already mentioned, West HS students continually defended their school to counteract its negative image. In contrast, North HS students discussed the violence and fighting at their school with surprise. Part of this was because their understanding for undoing the former West was to create schools that were safer and would attract students from the private schools. One student participant had transferred from a private school to the city schools when his parents

heard that North HS would be built. But to his recollection, even the old West western campus with its younger students did not seem to have had the amount of violence they witnessed at North HS:

N1MSr: I don't remember--maybe it was not even a year, but I don't remember behavior being as much as a problem. . . . I still don't remember—the fights. I mean, it just seems here, it's a lot more. I don't know. There just seems like behavior is more of an issue here than it was there . . . at [old West].

This student seemed confounded at the amount of fighting present at North HS—something he did not recall seeing at the former high school, even at the grade nine and ten campus, which was considered to have discipline problems. Somehow, this and other discipline problems at North had become worse. He and peers then mentioned several events that required police intervention and included arrests:

N3FSr: Like the stabbing. And I know that, like the last day of school—last semester, throughout the exams—well, we were exempt, but I came back up here to bring like pictures to [a teacher]. There had already been like a huge fight. People had like splattered all of the papers—all of their folders all over the floors—everywhere. There had been a huge fight in the courtyard. There were cops—and other cops there making them—and it was just this huge thing. All the teachers were out there. People got arrested. Somebody got arrested today.

N2FSr: Like [Name] said, there was more violence. [all start to talk at once]

N1FSr: There's even more stuff here and we're supposed to be the nice school.

N2FSr: Yeah, I know, and that's weird because that's why people move. Like people in private schools didn't want to go to [the former] West because they're like scared of the violence. And there—it seems like there is more of it here than there was there.

N4MSr: There was a fight today with like—five or six girls. Two or three of 'em got arrested.

Interviewer: And you don't remember that happening?

N1MSr: I remember fights there—yeah, I remember fights. But I just don't remember it—not even the fights here. There's just more--[gropes for word]

N4MSr: [prompts him] Trouble.

N1MSr: Trouble—yeah.

These North HS students noticed the discrepancy about safety and violence in their new school, which ironically had been created to have a school with less violence that would attract students from the private schools. Even with a smaller overall enrollment North HS seemed to experience a greater number of incidents, including police intervention and arrests at their school, than what they recalled from the old West western campus. This disturbed them, though none of the participants ever expressed fear in attending their school. Nor did they become defensive about their school's reputation as they listed the various violent incidents and fighting at their school. For them, the presence of the incidents was strange, given that these were the types of things that would drive private school students to exit or never enroll at their school. They never expressed concern about their enrollment or school image, however. It was West HS that seemed to be the school people continued to avoid.

*“Well, what about West?”*

As demonstrated through encounters West students had with community members, the belief that West was dangerous and that its students always fought often surfaced. This left West students continually explaining what did not happen (dangerous incidents) or what rarely happened (fights) at their school. The strange fact that bad events had happened at the two integrated schools located in wealthier areas of the city but not at West after nearly three years prompted this student to return to the question of West’s image:

N5M: So, I mean, what is the reputation [of West]? I would say they’re just thought—. [stops] Like, we thought the first incident to happen would be at West. We just thought, based on where its location is, the first thing to happen would be at West because when—that’s where we went at West [in ninth grade] and we realized that things would go on there, sometimes. Of course it happened at North HS [laughing] and then I think, like, didn’t East HS have an unloaded gun brought to school or something one day? They had something that went on there.

N7F: We have guns brought here too.

N5M: Yeah, but, something went on there. And so we were all kind of like, “Well, what about West?” We would’ve thought West—something would’ve happened over there. . . . it’s just kind of thought of as the predominately Black worst end of town area—not that they live there, because that’s just where the school is located. But that’s just how its reputation is gained, so

The bad events at North HS and East HS led students to reveal the belief that West HS was definitely going to be the bad, dangerous school. At least some students expressed surprise when

three years into the restructuring there still were no bad events at West HS, contradicting the image and expectations people had projected onto it.

### *The Stabbing Revisited*

In the fall of 2003, about eight weeks after the new schools opened, North HS had a stabbing incident in the school courtyard one morning before school. A sixteen year old female student who bussed to North HS attempted to stab a fourteen year old female bus student. This was the continuation of a fight that had commenced the evening before. According to newspaper reportage, some 20 to 40 students were waiting to go to class and about ten were close to the perpetrator. The attendance officer reacted quickly, containing the altercation, and no one else was hurt. Recognizably, the North HS stabbing was the one violent event most referenced by students from all three schools. And while it had the potential to mark North HS as bad and dangerous, in many of the students' eyes, this did not seem to happen. North HS students found humor in how they navigated the aftermath as they reminisced about it and surmised its significance for their school. This was such an outlier in terms of dangerous behavior that they could joke about it, as the following illustrates:

N8FSr: And then you bump into 'em and then they like pull out a knife and stab you.

[Interviewer: Oh, are people worried?] We just joke about it.

N5MSr: [cuts in, smiling] We have to now. Anything with a knife we have to joke about now really.

N8FSr: I mean, it's not really threatening.

N5MSr: I mean, what could have really prevented that from happening? You know. I mean she had the intent, the victim was right there in the center of the courtyard, she ran off the bus, left all of her stuff in the bus except for the knife. I mean, you really can't—

stop it. . . . But, I mean I feel a lot—not a lot safer, but I mean I feel safer at North HS probably than I did at [the former] West HS just ‘cause it’s a smaller group.

As the above responses indicate, the stabbing could not really hurt their school’s image. The unusual set of circumstances did not really fit their region, which seemed to insulate them from its bad press effects. The students never mentioned that this was a Black student (though mention that the perpetrator left her backpack on the bus would signal this) and that Whites in their area were not really thought of in this way.

One Black senior from East HS extended commentary on the stabbing by pointing out who did the stabbing—a Black female bussed in to North HS. She articulated what no one else would in the interviews, tying in the racial and class enrollment division of the restructuring with the exact stereotype the North High stabbing would fuel:

E5FSr: And I kind of think that that stabbing probably could play into this whole thing because, who were the ones getting stabbed? Well, it was a Black person who stabbed her and a Black person who got stabbed. So it’s like, “Oh, well we don’t need these people over here because it’s very—.” And it’s bad that that’s the perception. And then we watched this movie in here about Bowling for Columbine, and they were talking about how it’s always the Black male and all of this and stuff. And—that is an issue. And I just kind of think that—by having the schools like this it kind of promotes that. And, I just think that, you know, there are some issues that are probably beyond our control. You’re not going to make somebody think that, “Yeah, Black people are okay.” And that’s why the ones that are okay have to, you know, just—that there are some that are okay. And it’s not like every Black person is out to get you or may mug you or

whatever, but, I just think that there are some issues and that this zoning thing is not—  
helping any of it. I mean, it just makes it worse—the fact that it’s so—unequal.

She began with how easy it was to attribute the bad and dangerous behavior to the bussed-in Black students attending North HS, but her more cogent point was that community reactions to such behavior would surely drive the zoning to further separate the students by race, class, and region, and justifiably so because there was concrete evidence to support the negative stereotypes of Blacks. Serious events would make it more difficult to advocate for maintaining integrated settings. Students at the other schools talked about the serious incidents, but few admitted that West HS really did not fit into the category of being a dangerous place despite a lack of evidence. On the contrary, it seemed to so well fit this stereotype that West students could not keep up with undoing a negative reputation attributed to their school that it had not really earned.

#### *East High Students Speak*

A few East HS students mentioned the North HS stabbing and several other incidents as they compared the schools. Many East High students believed they were seen as less by North HS peers and even North HS parents. One student surmised that these reactions meant North HS families still considered North HS to be the safe school:

E3MSr: I had a conversation with a parent from North High before and they were just like, “Oh, you go to East High.” [disparaging tone] Like—like a shock like, “Oh, well, how is it over there? Is it okay?” And, it’s like they have this conception that it’s just—we have it—it’s so bad. There’s gang wars and fights and all this other stuff. [Other students laugh] Like—it’s not like that at all. And I think that’s just how they kind of—they view North High is the school that’s the “safe place.” And, I mean, I think if you



look at what's happened there's been more troubles with violent crimes and stuff at North High. You know. There's been a stabbing and stuff and we haven't had those problems. He was confounded at this parent's hints that East HS was unsafe, but thought this contradicted the evidence of dangers at North HS. North HS seemed insulated from ever acquiring a reputation for being dangerous.

Only one East HS student pointed out that nothing comparable to the dangerous events at North HS and East HS had ever happened at West HS:

E10FSO: West HS—it hasn't had anything real big other than that thing when they walked out of school, but at North HS they had a girl get cut up. Here, they had a girl call "Rape!" . . . West HS is the only one who hasn't had a big blow out thing.

A few students recognized that West did not ever seem to have serious incidents, though this did not stop them from thinking of West in disparaging ways as they provided evidence that it was far behind the other two schools. One East HS student listed West's walkout as contributing to its negative image, though affirmed that even before the walkout West HS was already considered to be a bad school:

E10FSO: Basically West—it was already being named as a bad school, but it seems like ever since those students walked out of school that day—that has been—added to the criticism that West is a bad school. And they have a large number of *fight*s [emphasizes "fight"] so—that's also included in the bad criticism of West.

Interviewer: Mm hmm. So why did people think it was bad that people walked out?

E10FSO: They felt as if the students—they were wrong to just leaving school—walking out, so [begins to reconsider, then changes voice tone]. But I don't feel like it was

wrong. I feel like they were fighting for what they believed. So, they stood up for their rights.

As presented in the preceding data area, West HS students believed the walkout had helped end the stalemate over the new building location and did not consider it as dangerous behavior.

North HS and East HS students were far removed from the dilemmas West students faced with no building, so their judgments of the walkout might have been influenced by news portrayals or other outside sources. Still, her comments that West HS already was bad based on the walkout and fighting corroborated with the ways in which West students noticed that community members regarded West HS. It was “already” bad so perhaps did not need evidence to support what was considered as fact by outsiders.

Though West students were confounded that their school was thought of as the dangerous “ghetto” school, to what extent did students at other schools notice unfair portrayals of them? One East HS student, a White female who had transferred from North HS had attended the system’s technology center and was quite familiar with commentary prevailing among the students about peers attending West HS:

E11FJr: I hear that all the time—from people from North HS and East HS. They say things like that. They don’t want to go over to West HS because they feel like it is ghetto—that it might be unsafe. But because I go to [technology center], I’ve gone over there and I’ve interviewed people for the TV show and you know, they’re—they’re very cooperative and they’re nice and I’ve also had the opportunity to *work* with people who go to West. . . . And--they’re nice people and that’s—they’re good people and people from North HS and East HS sometimes don’t want to give them a chance because of who they are [self-corrects] er—you know, the school that they go to and it’s unfair.

This student had taken a course at the one place in the system where students from all three schools would interact—the system’s technology center. She had also been at all three schools, including a short time at West HS for television production work. She heard commentary about West students, though personal interactions with them at West HS allowed her to assess what she heard. Her positive experiences with West HS peers led her to sense tragedy in that they were automatically marked as bad. Sadly, she noted, people seemed unwilling to give West students a chance—the negative stereotypes rampant about West HS would most likely prevent this from happening.

Students from North HS and East HS students also compared the three schools by referencing several of the same major incidents. They did not become defensive about a negative image of their schools, however, nor did they seem to face struggles to change such image. North HS and East HS seemed immune to negative portrayal, unlike West HS. One East HS student even expressed surprise at some of the incidents that happened at North HS, believing North HS would not be as “bad” as her school was:

E6FJr: It’s like it’s a lot of stuff that happened at schools that people that go to different schools don’t hear about. Like, for example, okay, I go to East HS. Okay, it’s things at North HS that happen that won’t nobody even know about unless some—unless somebody at North HS tell you. But you’ll be like, “Oh I didn’t think--.” You know. You wouldn’t think they would have happened at the school but in reality that’s—it’s a school just like East HS is a school. And so I guess the same things happen, you know.

The same bad incidents happened at both North HS and East HS, yet this never seemed to affect their images. But even without these events, it was West HS that remained the bad school of the system—a perception not easily shaken off.

### *Exhaustion*

The frequency with which West students had to refute the perception of constant fighting at their school was something that seemed to wear on them. This came through in one student's reaction:

W30FJr: [clasps hands on the sides of her head and sighs] I want to know where these rumors be coming from--that's what I want to know!

Interviewer: The rumors about—What rumors?

W30FJr: The rumors just that West HS has fights every day. And that West--

W12FJr: [Cuts in, joking] I be walkin' around lookin' for a good fight!

W30FJr: Yeah! I mean where—you couldn't just get up one day and be, like just say, "Well, I'm—gonna say something about West!" [Hits desk]

W22FJr: I'm only saying like, if you ever come to West, I hardly ever witness a fight.

Like I've only witnessed like two, three fights in our whole time of being at this school. West HS students often expressed frustrations at how rumors that West was bad just seemed to proliferate. It was overwhelming to live with the mark of the bad Black school. At times, they joked about the rumors as a form of resilience, as happened above, but it was clearly a struggle for many students to continually face these negative stereotypes. They were often left to defend their school—and not just about fighting, though that was one of the most frequent misperceptions they encountered that seemed to wear on them.

### *Summary of Safety and Discipline*

As the West HS students thought about and compared the three schools, they identified various negative comments about West HS and about themselves that they heard or encountered through conversations with peers and other community members. The idea that they were the

bad Black kids who had to be separated from other students was fostered by the increasing racial segregation under the newly restructured schools. The need for this separation had a tangible explanation for the West students—people thought they were dangerous and fought all of the time because this was what adolescents purportedly did who lived in that part of the city. The bad Black kids label, then, referred to expectations and assumptions by community members about their behavior. And yet as West students presented much evidence to disprove this--often using themselves as examples--they found that even in the absence of dangerous incidents or fighting their school was still cloaked in a bad image that could not easily be shaken off.

Students were cognizant of the role dangerous incidents and fighting inside a school played in forming its image. As time in the restructured schools unfolded, they became keenly aware that untrue portrayals could have just as great an effect, if not greater, on how a school was perceived by the community--even in the absence of bad incidents. With evidence to refute the negative portrayals of West, they realized that assumptions about their school transcended the school campus to include the surrounding region of the West Side. For them, the label of the bad Black kids on the West Side projected the behavior from any dangerous event that had ever taken place on the West Side onto the students attending their school. The idea that they were “ghetto” further marked them by expectations about the behavior of students living in or in close proximity to housing projects. In many ways, the West students felt powerless to overcome the unfair portrayals of them and their school, which in light of the continued low enrollment and racial isolation, seemed to influence where parents would send their children to school. Despite the resilience they showed in their responses to conversations with peers and parents—interactions where they corrected misperceptions about their school—it seemed that the bad Black kids label would surface with yet the next encounter.

Ironically, students felt that even publicized bad incidents at East HS and North HS never seemed to tarnish their images. They and their schools seemed to remain insulated from any effects of violence or unsafe events, even fights. On the other hand, West HS, without having had such incidents or much fighting could not escape the stereotype of a bad image no matter how much the students tried to correct misperceptions about their school. West students would remain the bad Black kids from the West Side.

In closing this data sub-area, it is important to note that peers noticed efforts the West Side students made to correct their lower status. The meaning of the restructuring, however, seemed to have deeply entrenched the schools into images along a dichotomy of two schools that were successful and one that was not. Despite resilience and resistance on the part of West Side students, such status was not easily changed:

E9FSo: I was in Sunday school one day and we were having a discussion about this—all three high schools. And I have a friend in church that goes to West. And this one boy that goes here—he said something about West High trying to keep up with East High and North High and she got really offended that he said that they were trying to keep up. So, I think that the people at West just want to be looked at as equal to us. And I'm not saying that they're not. I think that all three high schools are equal, but I think they think that people look at them like they're lesser than us and--they just want to be equal with everybody else.

While this respondent believed the three schools were equal she observed that peers from the integrated schools leveraged the West students' efforts against them—they were trying to be equal to the integrated schools. The more serious allegation was that their accusation that West

peers' attempts of trying to be equal implied there was a more general feeling of inequality between the schools—possibly one that could not be undone by West HS students' efforts.

### *Media Representation*

Students observed that West's bad reputation was reinforced in various ways by media representation. West students not only heard hearsay about their school being dangerous and less academic. They also saw it in the local media. Negative events at the integrated schools were either downplayed or never reported leading West students to believe there was a concerted effort to insulate those schools while highlighting West HS as the bad school. From social networks between the three schools they were aware that many negative incidents that took place at East HS and North HS went unreported in general media outlets, something they were certain would have happened if the event had taken place at West.

The media coverage was not just biased in the way it covered West in a negative light. It was also biased in West students' minds in the way their accomplishments went underreported. Events common to the three schools, according to students, were always reported with fewer or smaller photos and with less write up for West than North HS or East HS.

Finally, sometimes West was erased altogether. This came, in part, through the institutional aspect of the school as differing enrollment sizes created differing state athletic rankings. The rankings set up rivalry between North and East while placing West in a lower category. West's extra small enrollment made it harder for West to build teams for specialized sports. Low enrollment, plus the lack of community funding made it impossible for West to participate in some activities the other two schools could. These and other effects on programs all contributed to an erasure of West, as there was little to report relative to programs at the other two schools.

All of these perceived media biases were a source of frustration for West students. More importantly, they were part of the social text that students read, and from which they concluded that the wider Rivertown community thought they were less valued, less worth investing in, and less respected. This only added to similar messages they took from the school demography, school facilities, and school enrollment. All aspects of the new arrangement seemed to point in the same direction.

This data sub-area will present sections of media representation that surfaced in the data: (1) media bias in local news portrayals of the schools and of the West Side, (2) bias in coverage by the high school television station WEN (a logo that signified West, East, and North highs), and (3) the invisibility of West in local media recognitions. In the student-run television production, WEN, students noticed much less coverage of West events. Competing explanations surfaced as to why this happened, though like the formal media routes, this resulted in a “framing out” of West—at least this was how some students naturalized the differential treatment of West. This provided further evidence to students attending the other two schools that West did not really have much in the way of programs, something that they ultimately attributed to students who were either not that ambitious or not interested in scholastics or extracurricular activities.

#### *Media and the Public Narrative*

West students often complained that because of the media, all of the West Side was considered to be the bad part of the city. This was their community, so the negative portrayal, which seemed to be what people knew most about the area, was automatically transferred to people and places located on the West Side. Consequently, West HS was perceived as coterminous with the West Side geographic region—a dangerous place where bad incidents happened. Of those who discussed this, Black students from West HS and East HS



overwhelmingly felt the media was biased against West High; it exaggerated any wrongdoings at West HS while North HS and East HS enjoyed cover-ups of bad incidents that were worse than anything that occurred at West. Students indicated that such insulation for the integrated schools came in the form of no reportage about certain bad events or minimal mention of the more dangerous ones when they were covered in the local television and newspapers. It also meant that if bad incidents did occur at West they would be highlighted in broadcasts just to keep it clear to the community which school was bad.

One West senior who was active in several community programs for children and adolescents responded to his peers' complaints about bad media coverage for West. Despite negative reportage, there were good activities that people, including youth, were involved with on the West Side:

W13MSr: On the media subject, they always publicizing what--I mean if something bad happens on the West Side of town. But there are other good things that happen on the West Side of town, because the ROTC Program is volunteering with the Habitat for Humanity to go on out building houses for the low income people and they pulling in SGA, Art classes, and anybody else that want to go. And they go—I believe it's this Saturday. And, I got a team down there called "Warriors," and they go out with the Boy Scouts—teach classes with them and help them out.

This student personally knew of good people involved in good projects in this part of the city even if the greater community did not, which helped him balance his reaction to the presence of negative media. Still, his observation about the continual publicizing of the bad events on the West Side added to the evidence students mounted about the many negative discourses they faced that so grievously impacted their school. As other students pointed out, such portrayal,

even if not intentional, ultimately affected their school in damaging ways that they felt powerless to allay.

The racial division was also constantly on students' minds as they assessed the local media bias they believed was present. Some believed the media bias about the West Side would serve to justify the racial separation of students and most certainly could continue to promote it:

W34MJr: I think they like, rather talk about how—all the bad stuff at West HS rather than the good stuff at West HS. And, like I just think that their perception is skewed sometimes the way where they just classify this as the “bad side” the “Black people side” and all the trouble that happens over here and stuff—which isn't true.

W38MJr: It kind of seems like the newspaper show bad stuff to keep—West seem bad just so the public can believe that the schools should be separated and that shouldn't be nobody over here.

Again, students noted the stereotypical parallel that bad meant Black. But if students complained about West being looked down upon as the bad side of the city where the bad Black kids lived, at least several noticed that this misnomer had its utility for those who had promoted the restructuring. These juniors targeted the negative media portrayal as a strategy by some community members to justify the racial separation of the restructuring. Feeding information into the public narrative that the West Side children were bad would make it easier to arrive at a consensus within the community that the racial separation of the West Side children was, in fact, necessary.

In a different interview, another student made similar remarks. One student took the perspective of how parents would interpret the bad publicity in the media, particularly in the

local newspaper. The bad publicity would lead them to send their children to schools other than West:

W39FJr: Well, I think the parents want—that their child go to like East HS and North HS because they hear most of the bad things about West HS and they don't hear nothing mostly about the other schools. So they think like, "Oh, West HS bad—they get to fighting every day," and they don't hear nothing about them, so they decide they want their students to go to East HS. Practically every day you hear about West HS [Voice in background, "Yeah"] in the newspaper and stuff so they think, like, "West HS is a bad school. I want you to go to East High," or "I want you to go to North High. I won't hear that." They don't hear nothing about that.

If many students complained about the unfair and incorrect portrayal of West HS, this student opened a different level of interpretation. It was not just that West was inaccurately or negatively portrayed. It was that West High would be seen as a place that had fighting every day by association with bad reports about the West Side in the news. The other two schools would not be in the news, even though this belief contradicted<sup>28</sup> at least some reportage over the course of three years. In any case, students knew that the bad reports about West would lead parents to choose the other two high schools over West.

*Bad Means Black.*

Not all students overtly included race as part of the problem of the negative perceptions of West, possibly because the all Black school was assumed in their explanations. Others did,

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<sup>28</sup> Both the stabbing and the arrest of the murder accomplice were on the front page of the local newspaper, and with photos. West students, however, shared anecdotes of incidents at the other two schools that never were reported in the news. In lieu of no bad incidents at their school to report, the bad news to which they referred might have been reportage about not making AYP or percentages of students not passing graduation exit exams.

however. A few sensed that for the community, “bad” automatically meant “Black,” while White students enjoyed special protection from negative press:

W12FJr: The perception of West is so bad ‘cause the students and you know, everybody says that, you know, “the bad kids at West.” But you know, even if they just say “bad kids” that’s automatically saying “Black kids” because you know the school is a Black school, but—Okay. But, if it was White kids here, then the bad kids could be White and Black—you know what I’m saying?

This student explained that the bad kids label was attached to West, but that it was a coded term to really indicate that “bad” really meant “Black” because of West High’s demographic makeup. Any bad reports would automatically be associated with the Blackness of the school, confirming that they were all bad Black kids. Integrated schools would soften the racialized effects of any reportage.

The similarity in responses across interview groups indicated an understanding for many West HS students that people’s assumptions were stacked against them in ways they could not change. The all Black school became the scapegoat and would be treated differently. It already was treated differently by an enrollment policy that marked them as bad, but unlike the other two schools it would never be protected from exaggerated negative media portrayals or by keeping negative reportage out of the media. And this seemed to be what disturbed the West students more than the stereotypical view of being considered bad because they were Black. One student made a comment about the media bias to point to an unfair hierarchy of the schools:

W41FJr: I mean, the students say it. They always want to act like we the lower class school in the newspaper and stuff like that.

W18FJr: And also like if East HS and North HS was to do something—something terribly go wrong at their school, they won't hear about it in the newspaper. But if something terribly go wrong over here, like the smallest little thing, they want to put it in the paper or put it on the news and just put us out like we the worst school they've ever thought of.

W41FJr: When that girl got stabbed—yeah, it was going to be on the news, but they act like there ain't nothing happening over there. But let somebody get stabbed over here—we get shut down.

The point West students made was that over time, the other two schools' reputations seemed immune to the effects of numerous bad events, including ones that were publicized, in ways that West HS could never be. The phrase of being “lower class” reflected her understanding of why bad events would stick to West's reputation unlike the other two schools. It was the bad school.

In response to the bias in media representation, one student blended in both race and geographic location to explain the differential treatment of the schools. She noted that some students from the West Side who attended the other two schools acted just as badly as the bad students at West. They seemed to enjoy a special protection because they attended school with Whites, where it was easy to mix in and not be considered separately as bad Black kids, even though some of them were from the West Side. The media, she claimed, would never portray the integrated schools as bad:

W5FSr: A lot of people that go to East HS and North HS, they—some of them actually stay on the West Side. Some of them stay near the West Side. They act just as worse as anybody that go here. They fight just as much. But you never hear about that because they're mixed in with White students and they're not going to put those schools out there

like that. But—if something’s real bad happening at West with all these Black kids over here—it’s going to be in the newspaper or on the news. Because we Black. And I don’t feel like it should be like that. I feel like if West was still as big as it was and all the White kids and Black kids or whatever was mixed in here, we wouldn’t have that much SAID [emphasized “said”] about us if anything were to happen over here.

An integrated school would be protected from being labeled as “bad,” and the label of the bad Black kids from the West Side that could not be erased from West would have a fair chance of subsiding. Actually, an integrated school would be safeguarded from unfair press—there would be more community support to report incidents in a fair way.

While students recognized that they were powerless to undo the bad publicity characteristic of the West Side, some demonstrated resilience as they defended their school in ways that softened its effects for them personally, as this student did:

W42FJr: To tell the truth, most of the people that I know that went or would all go to North High—they would like to come to West. They actually think that West is a better school. And—they just say the reason why they’re not coming over here is because of how the school is zoned. And their parents—you know, listen to the bad publicity and all of that and think that their student would do better over at North High or East High instead of West.

Even if parents paid attention to the bad publicity, at least they knew students who wanted to come to their school, a thought that fostered resilience against the unfair stereotypes.

*“It’s not Race.”*

Several students believed a long history of bad incidents that had been publicized about the West Side influenced how people perceived West HS. This, they felt, meant that it was not

really race that made people think West students were bad. It was the region of the city where crime was more rampant that reflected on their school. One student could trace back to some negative events that had taken place in the area while she was in middle school. To her, this obviously made an impact on how West HS students were viewed, an explanation that seemed to make sense to her:

W30FSr: It's really not that much skin color. It's all about where we live and what side of town we on. And the majority of the stuff that happened in the media that's bad takes place on this side of town. That why—four, five years ago was stuff—was really, really bad. Majority of the incidents didn't happen on East, North, or South. They always happened on the West Side of town. Now that we have all students going to the West Side of town—that's how they promote our behavior to be because we live on this side of town.

This senior argued that it was not so much race as the crime in their geographic location that marked West HS as the bad school. There had been bad events (referring to crime in the area) yet she pointed out the unfairness of attributing that past and local history to a school and to students. Such a history, by default, meant that the all of the West Side adolescents, like the stereotypical portrayal of urban Black youth, would be considered as bad. Their bad image was not really race then, but because their school was in an area where crimes took place more than other parts of the city, thus intersecting race with region in ways that were difficult to undo. The media coverage of any West Side incident had the effect of reinforcing this image. Her point, like the student who attributed the idea of bad Black kids to the creation of an all Black school, had to do with integration in a different way. Creating neighborhood schools in an area known for crime would naturally lead to this negative portrayal of the children who lived there.

Neighborhood schools, she explained, had created this. Now that students remained in West Side schools, this location would always be a lens with which to view them. She used this idea to describe differentiated publicity of the dangerous events at the schools:

W30FSr: Like the boy brought a machete at—East HS. Nobody hardly know about it. They not going to publicize it and make it in the media that bad like they do West and North High.

Interviewer: Why not?

W30FSr: To me—I feel like they just—We Black. Not that—I’m not going to say race. I’m going to get off race, because it’s really not that big a deal about race. It’s just the fact that—our population, we just a group a students on the one side of a town or on the West side of the district and that makes them feel like, “Okay, ooh they on that side of the town or those kids are *wild!* [emphasizes “wild”] All projects goes to that school, so you *know* they goin’ to be bad.” You know—something like that. Any little thing.

Like this student above, a few students did not believe the problems West had with media bias were attributable to race—region (and class) played a part too. Some felt that much of West High’s negative publicity had to do with its location:

W6FSr: It is a issue about the—how the media portrays our school. And going with what [Name] said, it’s not so much about race. It’s where we live and--what has happened in the past over here on this side of town. . . . And I mean, just because things have happened don’t mean that they should hold that against us and make it seem to other people who don’t know about people on this side of town and don’t know about this area feel that it’s a danger for their kids to be over here or it’s a danger for us from this side of town to interact with their children.



To her, the negative media portrayal of West was based upon events outside of the school that had taken place in this part of the city in the past—something that cannot be erased, but something that students felt continued to affect their school. Importantly, the word “danger” surfaced here. Outside the school were dangerous events (crimes), not inside the school. But seeing the West Side students as dangerous came through media portrayal of the West Side. Parents who did not know them would believe this and avoid their school. The unfairness of including West as part of this West Side dangerous place image meant two striking consequences for West that affected its present and future enrollment: first, the school was considered dangerous because of its location, which people would want to avoid and second, it was assumed to be dangerous for people’s children (especially White) to interact with the West students specifically. The first conclusion had some logic—there were dangerous events that had taken place on the West Side and the school was located in that area. The second conclusion was problematic; it implied that West students were being blamed for crime on the West Side.

Below, she continued with the idea of danger, which she sensed from White parents of students who had attended an interest meeting for the Pre-IB. She believed West High’s location (and its students) evoked fear in White parents. Relevant here is the media portrayal that seemed to feed the idea that the West students and school were dangerous:

W6FSr: The media and other people who don’t know people on this side of town don’t know anything about this side of town. They [parents interested in the Pre-IB program at West] get the wrong perception of what’s going on over here and they feel that, like I say, it’s a danger for their kids to come over here and to be interacting with people from another side of town. And I don’t think that’s right, because they can’t just judge us. . . .

And if it's all about education, then it shouldn't matter where the program is or where you go to school.

This student suggested that media portrayal created and reinforced the image that West HS was a dangerous school and that West students were dangerous people. West's image was tightly connected to events external to the school that had happened and continued to happen on the West Side. West, unlike the other two schools, was left at the mercy of events that did not take place inside it or with its students. She attributed the negative media portrayal to reporters and others who did not really know the people on the West Side. Not intentionally, but equally harmful, this ignorance led to misconceptions about the West Side community that they were powerless to undo.

*Pile On Effect.*

As West students spoke about the negative publicity they seemed to enter a labyrinth of the social context that disadvantaged them and then reinforced the disadvantages, thus magnifying their problems with no way out. West's location on the side of the city where housing projects and a history of crime rates marked it as a bad place, an image that the school automatically took on but which negative publicity and a lack of positive publicity only seemed to reconfirm. It was all Black, so stereotypically meant that the students were disengaged with learning and fought all of the time. Even without incidents, West could not erase this negative image. The negative image led to a much lower enrollment as people avoided sending their children to West HS, making it difficult to offer programs the other two schools could, which would differentiate the recognitions so crucial to enrollment. The lack of community funding, also characteristic of a community with less discretionary income available to support programs, placed other barriers on extracurricular activities that typically attracted students to a school.

Without these extracurricular activities, there would be limited to no positive publicity from recognitions. What recognitions could take place if there were no programs? All of these conspired against enrollment--numerically and with respect to diversity--and ultimately led students to sense that West HS, without support, was seen as less than the other two schools but would not easily be able to move out of this lower status.

One frequent response students gave was that the other two schools were somehow protected from negative media. They would continue to be the good schools, which West could never be:

W40MFr: See, when stuff happens at other schools, they cover it up--like it never happened. 'Cause like, I hear like people at East HS and stuff, they get in fights—they have people end up going to the hospital—that don't ever happen at West. And then like what happened at East HS—it's covered up. Don't nobody know about it. But if it happened here—everybody—in the whole city would know about it.

This student's response was a reminder of the social networks students had with students and even staff at the other schools. Many students had extended family members attending or working at the other schools, so while they might not always immediately know of an incident, eventually they would. They heard about bad incidents that never made the media, so had concrete proof that cover-ups existed for the two other schools. Certain bad incidents would never make the media—specifically those taking place at the two larger integrated schools.

### *Media Coverage*

As noted in the earlier data subarea of enrollment, students were sensitive to media portrayal of their school and felt shortchanged when West High's honor roll list did not appear in the newspaper with all of the other schools. West HS students were also sensitive to the use of

words and phrases used to portray their school when it did make the paper. They noted coverage of athletic events and quoted these verbatim as evidence of the media bias against them:

W12FJr: Okay. We beat the brakes off East High. In volleyball! Beat the brakes off of 'em. Just beat 'em bad. In the newspaper it had, "West Survives East High." We didn't *survive* East High. We murdered East High. [laughs] When you survive somebody it's like a 25-24 tie game and you win. But it wasn't "survive." It was beat the brakes off of 'em. It's the way it was.

This student referred to the headline for coverage of a volleyball game. The three schools remained athletic rivals for certain of the smaller sports, and the above shows the attention West students gave to media portrayal of their school, something that further supported the idea that they were viewed as less. Similar experiences occurred with newspaper reportage of a high stakes sport events, like football:

W12FJr: One week I think North High lost and West lost. I think that was like our first game. Okay—they had this about how North HS lost but they had all this stuff that North HS did. All the stuff that they did, like the positive stuff—the first down and all that. But in West's game—it was definitely that we didn't make no first down, no punt returns. Nothing. It was just like, they talked about all the bad stuff we did and we lost and North HS lost too, and they talked about all the good stuff they did.

Students paid attention to the sports coverage of the three high schools in the local newspaper, as this portrayed the schools to the community, so even media took on a competitive bent.

Discrepancies in the write-ups for the public signaled that the schools were not viewed equally in the community—the others were favored over West HS. North HS students were favored in the media and recognized even if they did not win; no such description was provided for West's

efforts. West HS students noticed differences in column size and the presence or absence of photographs for reportage of other events common to the three schools. West's homecoming parade, for example, never even got in the paper, while the other two schools' parades did. Students noted distinct and measurable ways West HS was portrayed in the media, and believed this was an indication that the community regarded them as less. These details, they argued, made it obvious that the schools were differentially treated by the local newspaper.

As stated before, this study is not to empirically prove whether the students' read of the media was true. What is important is that the students read these and concluded that they were not respected as students attending the other schools were. Fairness in recognitions was an important way of showing them respect quite possibly because the skimping on articles about West's accomplishments seemed to have the opposite effect. With fairness in reportage on good aspects of their school, West could be valued as equal with East HS and North HS. The differential treatment and omissions, even if not intentioned, led them to sense that they were less. This all worked against their precarious position in relation to the other two schools. Their cry for equal treatment was so that West HS could become a school of choice like the other two. They were correct in anticipating what the reaction from the general public would be when their grades and honors never appeared the paper:

W10FJr: It just makes it seem like our students ain't doing anything. . . . This whole class right here—it's like the top line at West. This is like gifted class. And we don't even get recognized. People don't even look at us. They don't even ask about the IB program. It's more about the AP program at East High and North High than it is about the IB program at West.

The students, then, were sensitive to how both the negative portrayal and absence of positive reportage affected their school. Both would feed the idea that West students did not do anything of worth. This student noticed a similar effect the lack of recognition had on the IB Program at West. The AP courses were favored at the other schools and promoted. This did have the effect of keeping academically high students at the other two schools and limit the number who would participate in Pre-IB courses. That year, none of their Pre-IB peers would enroll at West HS for the IB Diploma Program. Though such a policy did not make sense to them, they realized that somehow, being in the elite IB program at West was not something that was recognized much in the community. This lack of publicity made it seem that AP was better and far more supported across the system than the IB, which they knew was a contradiction considering the more rigorous preparation for college that the latter offered. Thus, the one program that could have made West High as good as or in some ways better academically than the other two schools was not publically recognized.

#### *WEN TV.*

On a much smaller scale, though more consistently visible to students was the media bias West students perceived of WEN coverage, the high school weekly televised program. The system's technology center offered a series of electives in television broadcasting to students from all three schools at a satellite building. As part of the television production coursework, students recorded events at the schools that were edited and then televised each Friday morning. Though students covered events at their home schools, there were times when they went to other schools for interviewing and recording. Technically, ten enrollment spaces were reserved for each school, but if participation was low for a school, other students would either be sent to that school to cover its events or they just were not covered. Extracurricular events unique to the

schools as well as those commonly held at all three were covered weekly in the broadcast. But although this was always done with positive news slant, West still appeared to receive less coverage:

W8FJr: But it's not just the news, though. It's just not the Rivertown Newspaper. It's like WEN TV! Now, I mean, I love WEN TV. But it's like, they say stuff like, "Oh, West lost." And they show the scoreboard for two seconds. But if someone somebody else loses, they'll have it up there for like—I mean they'll show the whole game.

The above was an observation many West students noted and became the general consensus over time that characterized the student-produced program. Students noticed not just the extent to which athletic events were reported but the ways in which they were portrayed on the program. Losing a game did not mean the event was downplayed—clips of efforts were shown, though this was not a given for every school. If the obvious was to note a difference in representation between West HS and the other two schools, another disappointment was that for the most part, only West's basketball games seemed to be covered while other events were never reported, as another student noted:

W5FJr: And the only thing that they show good on WEN is our basketball team. Our basketball team is like the best out of the three schools. Well, as a matter of fact, it is. But that's not the only thing at West that's good. It's other things. Our choir is good.

West students also drew on events common to the three schools to illustrate the distinctions made between the schools through WEN coverage. But students noticed and talked about the complaints they had heard from peers at West HS. They assessed these complaints in what they felt were terms of fairness—West HS just needed to work harder so that they had

worthy accomplishments and needed to send more students to participate in the Television Production class so that they could record them for their school:

B11FSo: I've talked to some people about WEN TV—like the program that the school has. Like, they feel that they're not active enough in it. Like they think that it focuses more on East HS and North HS and not them. But that's 'cause like they didn't take the class or 'cause like some of their sports don't do as well. You want to like show the NEWS [emphasizes the word "news"] and the people going on to do the like greater things and greater accomplishments like. They haven't had as many accomplishments as like the other ones yet. So they just need to like work on it and they'll be more active and they'll be like more successful and they'll have more like publicity and recognition of things that have gone on.

Students from North HS and East HS usually attributed West's not accomplishing as much as the other two schools to a lack in interest or effort. This suggested that students in the other two schools believed little or nothing worthy of recognition was happening at West. Many students were aware of West student's frequent complaints about the bias in reportage on WEN—usually after an event had been overlooked or barely reported. This fed back to the nonparticipation in the WEN courses on the part of West students. Students needed to take the second course to represent their school and students were reluctant to go to their rival schools to report their events. In the end, each school had to fend for itself and somehow the West students did not seem to get that point. The show could not help but reflect the student representation in the television production courses.



One West HS student pointed out that there was evidence that students worked hard and behaved well at their school. Every month students were recognized by placing their photos in the entranceway of the school, something any visitor would notice about their school:

W21MSr: I want get on the little media thing. If--a majority of the people looked at when we first come in—the students of the month [refers to display case in entrance way] all that—put them on the news, they'll change their whole point of view about how they look at us. But, they don't even know what we got in our front lobby 'cause they don't come.

In response to the negative and biased press that West received, he drew attention to counter narratives of good students that could be placed in the media to correct West's bad image from neglectful media bias. Even if they were not mentioned in the newspaper, the honored students in the main foyer were a visible sign that there were good, hardworking students at West that anyone in the community would know if they visited their school. He noted that there did not seem to be interest on the part of the adult community members to come to West, so this was not likely to take place. Instead, the label of bad Black wild kids would proliferate even though they as a student body knew it to be untrue.

Peer responses, though, pointed to lack on the part of West students. If they cared, then they needed to get involved by taking the WEN courses. Absent was any recognition of the structural barriers West faced with its small enrollment and high percentage of special needs students. No one would tie in a greatly reduced faculty that squeezed West students out elective choices with the scheduling constraints they had to navigate around just to fulfill core courses. To some extent, differences in WEN reportage reflected participation rates that would have to survive scheduling constraints. Still, it was easier to view the West HS students as lacking,

overlooking any constraints they faced. The message their peers had for West students was clear: participate more and start working harder to have some type of accomplishments worthy of being reported. This all pointed to deficits in West students that created the lack of reportage. The following reflection was provided by a senior who had participated in WEN, which better summarized the message that WEN reinforced over time:

B13MSr: We'd almost never had stories coming from West and that's something they complained to us about. But the truth is there wasn't just all that much going on. I mean, they might like have a game every once in a while that we'd have to go out to or something else, but there just wasn't all that much to report on.

Though peer participants snickered at this remark, students across the room became somber as he continued to speak, eventually creating dead silence. As he gave his views on how West had been left out because of lacks in important resources their own school had enjoyed from the start, this group of students only then seemed to reconsider what had happened to West over time, which turned the discussion into how curricular and extracurricular program differences led to its erasure.

### *Erasing West*

The absence of recognitions took its toll on how West HS would ultimately be viewed. It was easy for the North and East students to ascribe lacks to the West HS students, pointing to lacks in programs as evidence. This framed West HS out as less and different. The first year placed North HS and East HS in the same athletic region, while West was off fending for itself as a tiny school in its pre-established 6A division ranking under the state's athletic association, Alabama High School Athletic Association (AHSAA). That East HS and North HS would become rivals was a natural assumption, as they started out together in the same ranking. West

was easily removed from the picture as North and East students focused on the real rivalry, that of North HS and East HS. One student revisited what had taken place the first three years with the East HS and North HS football games to explain how their rivalry seemed to place the schools into a hierarchy:

B3MSr: I think—the first year they [referring to West] were 6A and I think the second year they were also, and now they're 4A, which means, athletically and stuff, they're not in the same region as us . . . We're 5A. We're gonna be 6A. But they—Us and North High—ever since the division, have been athletically in the same region. So the rivalry—it all means more as far as going to playoffs and that kind of stuff. West's always just kind of—I mean I guess they're doing their own thing. It's just kind of like—they're worried about theirs and we're worried about ours and, I mean, it's us and North High. That's a big thing to determine the, you know, all the athletics. But with West, they're just kind of—left out.

The above remark came as East HS students tried to explain more about their school affinity with North HS. When commentary focused almost entirely on the two integrated schools, I asked them more questions about West—leaving them without much to say. The blanks they drew led them to conclude how little the two integrated schools had in common with West HS. It was far removed from their special rivalry, yet this separation meant West High had practically become a separate entity.

The East High seniors discussed the meaning of the state's athletic division for the local system's schools. It set up formal relationships as playoffs determined a school's standing in the state. They would play West HS in friendly neighborly games, but they admitted their attention was more focused on their real competitors, which they figured had to have been true for West.

Several students, like the one above, noticed that an outcome of their differing state classifications and regions was that West, over time, had become the forgotten school. As students analyzed this aspect of the restructuring, they noticed that in the big picture, West had become left out—something that evoked a sense of shame and guilt:

B13MSr: I think, when it comes right down to it, the main reason that people—just don't talk about West as much is that—it's kind of a guilt—that, you know, the poor kids that got left behind. It's not something people want to think of though.

The rankings had separated the schools leading them to have different relationships even if they were part of the same system. Still, the lower ranking school (athletically speaking) at the same time evoked “poor West” empathy from these participants. For them, West students ended up left behind and this was not something that West should be blamed for. Despite the leadership rhetoric of equality it was clear to these students that many factors ultimately worked against West HS, making it the forgotten school. As East High students assessed their own struggles to build teams it was easy for them to see how this task must have been insurmountable and therefore quite unfair for West, which they assumed had less access to much needed funds.

Though students were uncomfortable with this realization, some sought to discover how the East High-North High dichotomy had become so strong. Students noticed the encouragement from teachers and administrators to spark rivalry between the two Class 5A schools from the onset of the split:

B3MSr: And then, with the first year with West, it was a close game. And then after that, West's program just disappeared. So, I mean it was just kind of—North High and East High had been kind of close back and forth and I think it's just that's, you know, the teachers built it up, the administration built it up, and then that just added to it.

Some students realized as they spoke that in many ways the rivalry only served to ensure that West HS would be the school that would eventually become invisible. It was not on par with North HS and East HS in the classifications, and then adults encouraged rivalry between the two larger schools as a new tradition. This explained for them how easily West HS could have become the forgotten school, even though it did not seem to sit well with them. From the visible outcomes of the athletic programs, students observed that West was not equal with North High and East High. As the student above explained, it seemed that West just dropped out of the picture after the first year. At one point, they admitted that state classification influenced their thinking—West was not in the same region<sup>29</sup> and they knew it was about to drop to a different category that distanced them by two levels, so it was just natural to forget about them. East HS students felt guilt about the treatment West HS students received as they realized the effects the restructuring had over time. They felt struggles in building teams, too, but not of this type. West had been omitted from their responses until pressed in the interview to talk more about West—something about which they kept drawing blanks. Up until this point, even their naturalized “framing out” of West had not seemed apparent to them. Still, they did try to make their distanced relationship with West HS a good one—at least they did not speak badly about West:

E12MSr: I think we don't talk bad about West HS mainly because they don't talk bad about us . . . And with West it was—they don't say anything about us, we don't say anything about them.

Still, the atmosphere was heavy as they quietly attempted to resolve the stark disparities between the two larger schools and West. Naturally, they thought, they would have more contact with

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<sup>29</sup> According to the AHSAA website, for two years West High was in the same division of 5A, from 2004 to 2006, though at the extreme opposite end of East High and North High in the ranking. West HS then went down to 4A as its enrollment declined, while they moved up to 6A.

students to which they felt greater affinity. They felt it just was not logical that East HS students would even know many West students since they had attended different middle schools. One student refused to accept this explanation reminding his peers that they had all attended the old West as ninth graders so had to know at least some of the West students. This pointed to the ways in which the athletic divisions and the labels they created of the schools, even in terms of recognitions, reinscribed the unspoken logical notion students held that West High was less—something that West’s smallness, demographics of race, class, and geographic region only served to intensify over time.

A similar disturbance surfaced about the unevenness of the three schools. Though the student did not know how to resolve this, it was clear that West had become framed out, which she addressed in this observation:

E9FJr: Like I told my parents one day—I think like before all of us were born, I think they should’ve had two high schools—not the Black and White but two high schools in the city and four middle schools so that two middle schools would go to one high school and two could go to another so that people could actually mix and mingle with people that they had never been with before. And--like competition is in football and basketball would be kind of equal because—now, with West, well with three schools, somebody is kind of left out as in competition-wise. Like they don’t have anybody to compete with, but if you have two high schools, then it would be fair and equal.

Students were confounded about how to correct a high school arrangement that promoted overt inequality across the schools. For West students, the Black and White divide was a problem--the schools should not have been divided along color. Yet the student above further addressed the manifested inequality through athletics that she attributed to having three schools. She would

not have known the other structural constraints that made this so unequal, but she did know that two schools seemed similar while one was left out—something she felt was unfair and needed correction. As one student summarized:

B13MSr: There's the sense that of the three schools, West HS was the one that got most like left behind. That it was, you know, the one that they just kind of forgot about.

Through this process of scrambling for recognitions and setting up school rivalries, they realized that somehow, it really was all about East HS and North HS. West High School had become the forgotten school. These students readily admitted that even they had forgotten about it.

#### *Summary of School Image*

While the first two data areas highlighted the meaning of the restructuring as a racial division that differentiated how important resources were allocated, that analysis led West students to consider their dilemma of not really being a school of choice like the two integrated schools. To explain their extra small enrollment and why non-Black students did not enroll at their school, West students presented a fairly complex analysis of how West HS had become the bad school and they had become the bad Black kids through the images the schools acquired. West students saw that theirs was the ghetto school that was seen as dangerous despite a lack of serious incidents like the two integrated schools. Students across the schools considered this to be true a priori—an all Black school located near housing projects in a predominately Black area of the city would automatically take on this image. And though North and East students admitted surprise that West HS had never had bad incidents, they tended to agree that West was just known as bad. West students fought against this image, providing evidence to indicate the fallacy of this idea, but to no avail. They saw that media conspired against them as it selectively reported bad incidents or fights, even underreporting these when they occurred at the integrated

schools. While positive reportage might have helped to undo this bad image, West students noticed a paucity of this for their events and accomplishments in the local newspaper or in the student-run WEN television broadcast. West students realized that despite rhetoric of equality, their school would always be seen as the dangerous place that parents would avoid. To some extent, this was a factor of race—Black meant bad and all Black meant really bad, though many students felt that crime surrounding their school also conspired against their school image. Class identity was also a part of this as they considered that their school’s proximity to housing projects would influence community members’ ideas about safety and discipline, which contrasted to how most students behaved at West.

That West High’s enrollment remained extra small and all Black had an explanation then, and came into greater relief through this data area. All of this conspired against West as it remained the extra small school that could not become a school of choice. West students new this and sensed the profound inequality of the restructuring. It had created West HS as the bad school, and they had become the bad Black kids who were wild, dangerous, fought all of the time, and were disengaged with learning. West HS and its students, then, were less. Students resisted this and made fierce attempts to undo this image, but it seemed that the only way they could undo this was to correct the racially lopsided demographics of the schools because people would never believe they were not stereotypical bad Black kids.

This meaning of the restructuring had consequences for educational opportunities. Students directly attributed losses to the social context created by the demographically differing schools. Some of these consequences are treated briefly in the final data section to illustrate how students drew conclusions as to the fairness of the restructuring.



## Curricular Features

In the previous data sections, students noted the myriad ways that West HS was not only considered less, but caught in a downward cycle as it was positioned against two schools that would become the schools of choice for the system. This, they observed, intensified over time as zoning decisions and various types of resource allocations worked against West to reinforce negative perceptions the community held about it. As the students noted, especially those attending West, no matter what aspect of the schools they considered, they would read in the text of the social context that West HS was less. Here, some of those texts have been divided into special areas of the curriculum in the fourth and final data area, curricular features. The following sub-areas are included: (1) athletics, (2) academics, (3) a special section on the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, and (4) the hidden curriculum of diversity. While the other data areas have mainly focused on the symbolic—that is, the meaning of various types of actions over the three years of the restructured arrangement, this data section will document actual programs and the extent to which the restructuring lived up to promises of equality with educational opportunities and experiences that leadership guaranteed would be provided with the restructured high schools.

Although leaders were earnest to assure community members that the three new schools would offer everything the former West had, there was also a concerted effort to keep some element of equality across the schools. For example, teachers working on the team for the high school course catalog spoke of removing course options by year two to keep offerings even across the schools, though also expressed frustration that courses they knew exceptional faculty could offer their school had to be removed because this would not be available for all three schools.

These were formal aspects of the restructuring—what policy held as the standard. But the stretch between formal and real still transformed opportunities into differing configurations for the three schools, as the students discovered over time.

### *Athletics*

Across the three schools there was consensus that the restructuring resulted in challenges for school athletics, and reflecting student concerns, this was a very large data area. Students from all three schools discussed the burden the overall smaller school sizes had placed on building new teams. One of the most salient points the students noticed about athletics was how the smaller school sizes affected the size and quality of the teams, or in some cases, whether there even was a team for a particular sport. How students discussed this team building differed across the schools, though. For the two larger integrated schools, students tended to compare their new teams with how they understood teams had been under the old West arrangement and its tradition of state-level championships. Conversely, with facing so many structural constraints that came with their much smaller size, West HS students tended to compare their school with the other two to mark their progress in athletics even though they upheld the ideal of the old West.

The restructuring affected athletic opportunities for students in various ways. As discussed earlier, one major change was the state athletic rankings, which were based upon school enrollments, and led to a special rivalry between North and East that had the effect of erasing West HS. Students, however, had many other ways to assess the restructuring through athletics.

### *More Opportunities*

There was now a smaller pool of talented athletes to draw from within each school regardless of which school one attended. For all three schools there was a gain in benefits compared to the old West as more students could be on teams and some who usually stayed on the bench now had playing time. Many students noticed and commented on this positive aspect of the restructuring (though often stated that this was the *only* advantage). While students were quick to point out the increase in participation opportunity, they were cautiously conservative in their estimations of the extent to which this good outcome balanced all of the negatives they felt had come with the restructuring:

W7FSr: Well, when the schools first split up one advantage was—with it being a smaller school—everybody kind of had an opportunity to explore just about any sport that they wanted to explore. And basically I talk a lot about that—the sports a lot—because that’s the only advantage that I can really find in that situation. That everybody had a chance, you know, where it was probably thirty-five people on a soccer team, when the school split up, they only had five people left that really played soccer and you need at least seven people on the field. So they was kind of just accepting little or no experience and, “We’ll teach you when you get here.” And that was—it was fun and it was an advantage.

Many students, like the one above, were careful to consider what athletic opportunities meant in the context of the overall change in the school structure. Among the many disadvantages to the split was the loss in the competitive edge of athletics, but students recognized that perhaps the restructuring did help in one small way by allowing more students opportunities to participate. This advantage would be especially true for opportunity to place in the big attraction sports:

E13FJr: I would say in a certain way it's good 'cause like the boys who we look as good on our football team—if we'd been one school—they probably wouldn't have gotten no playing time. Football and basketball. They would've been right on the bench. They probably would've made the team, but they'd have been right on the bench.

Students, then, recognized the benefits of the new arrangement for beginning athletes. Three schools meant more teams; more teams meant greater opportunity to play.

### *West High Athletics*

In contrast with their peers, West students had a more precarious set of circumstances to face, which they discussed with frankness. They, after all, were the extra small school, and that alone intensified the burdens they faced to build teams:

W25FFr: I think like this year we had like twenty people playing football and then for—like East HS and North HS may have like fifty some people playing. I think that hurt us like a lot—as far as the football team.

Team sizes for a major sport were obvious, and West students could not escape noticing the great contrasts. At this point, West shared their same athletic division, 5A, but the difference in team size was noticeable, providing West students with an idea of the extent to which competition across the schools was unbalanced. Rather than comparing their school with the former West, it now became a large difference to compare it even with the other two schools.

In a different interview, a senior made a similar observation about the team sizes of the other two schools and the advantages this provided them in games:

W46MSr: Like, over at East HS. They're like—really competitive with West HS. Like during football season. You hear like, more like, "We're more better," and all those things—like, 'cause they got a bigger team. Like their teams—North HS and East HS

teams are way bigger than ours. West only had like thirty some players on their team [referring to football] so they will have the advantage either way you go.

Such responses were common among West students who noted that team sizes alone disadvantaged them. This difference, though mainly attributable to structural inequities, still led students in the larger two schools to take this as a sign that they were better than West. Having larger teams was a visible difference that for some, symbolically reflected effort. West students recognized that the split had made it more difficult to build teams for all of the schools, yet they noticed that this distinguished them far more from the successes of North HS and East HS.

The effect of smaller schools on team building was even more noticeable for the minor sports:

W2MSr: If you're in like a smaller sport, the team will be even smaller because I'm on the soccer team and when—while I was in ninth grade we had like twenty five people and now we will be good to have ten. So it's like, when you already have a sport that doesn't have a popular following, when you cut the size of the school you're cutting down the team and you may not be able to have that team. Like you have a smaller program. It just won't work at a smaller school.

Team building for the smaller sports was far more vulnerable to the enrollment size of a school. As this student observed, very small high schools just could not support the sports with smaller followings or that were more specialized. In a different interview a student felt that a large number of students had left West HS, making it harder for them to field teams for special sports they supposed East HS and North HS had:

W25FFr: Like if a lot of kids didn't leave West then we probably would have had more sports, like tennis and--I don't know, other sports—I think. You know, golf or

racquetball and stuff—like other sports that we didn't—we don't have at this school, but East High and North High probably do.

W47FFr: Like [Name] said, they don't have a lot of activities or whatever because a lot of students are not interested. It's enough students that play sports, but they're not interested—like people at East HS and North HS.

W48FFr: I think some people are interested in some of the sports—because they don't have the sports that—some people that'll want to play. Like, I want to play tennis, but they don't have tennis . . . We didn't have enough people. We don't have enough people, no court, no equipment. [Voice in background: No coach.] No coach.

The students were perplexed about the lack of teams at West for certain of the smaller sports. A lack of interest might explain this, but West HS had lost a lot of students, making it hard to assess what was wrong. The last respondent noted structural constraints West continued to face as a high school--the lags in construction of their building (where school and fields would finally be located on the same campus), not enough people interested, and the extra small faculty for sponsors; these were root causes that explained lacks in fields, equipment, players, and coaches, all of which influenced whether West could even have certain teams, like tennis or golf.

Not only were main teams smaller, some teams were eliminated with the split, leading to fewer opportunities for students. West students often saw their extra small school size as the most significant factor affecting their athletics:

W46MSr: We also have another sport—soccer. We had like, girls and boys playing together on the same team because we don't have enough players like on the team to play for a whole—like females and males—all together playing. Also, with the girls' basketball team we see—going to East High's games—they had like twelve girls on the

bench, North HS twelve girls on the bench, we only had like six or five. No subs. No anything.

Unlike the other two schools, enrollment numbers adversely affected West's team building and its possibilities for performance far more than the other two schools.

All of the schools were affected in some ways, yet not having a team stood out and students took note of this. One senior observed that several teams were missing from West, and that over time continued to have difficulty fielding smaller sports, N5MSr: "West's not strong at all. They don't even have a tennis team. I don't know if they have a golf team." Many students at the larger schools made similar observations, though it was easy to attribute weakness to lacks in the West students themselves rather than as consequences of the restructuring.

#### *West and Basketball*

Despite the many difficulties West encountered with team building its basketball team was exceptional during the first three years of the restructuring. Students across the system recognized this, though it could not undo their general assessment of West's lacks:

B3MSr: "I guess, like my perception of West was like they don't really have much going on anymore. Almost all their athletics—all their extracurricular activities—they don't really have anything other than basketball."

The difficulties with team building shaded how peers viewed the West athletics. Still, West stood out in basketball, which continued to make it to the state championships the first three years, unlike North HS and East HS.

West students were aware of the lack in team building at their school. And many, likewise, noted that their basketball team was their most outstanding feature:

W37MJr: It is being really changed. The only thing, really the only thing that still keeps ourselves alive is the basketball games.

While other students' interpretations of West HS only doing well in basketball seemed a disparaging assessment of their athletics, West's success in basketball was a strong indicator of hope for the West students. That their extra small school still made it to the state championships like the old West (and multiple times at that) was proof to them that they could work to attain the level of success of the former West, even if their peers thought this was an unrealistic goal. Some emphasized that just as basketball kept them in league with the old West, they would continue to work up to that level in all areas.

#### *Athletic-driven School Choice*

Students from all three schools saw that the zoning dispersed the athletic talent across them. Differences across the schools with athletics became compounded by choices student athletes made to attend a certain school. Some degree of school choice operated as mentioned earlier in the enrollment section, though athletes were often more aggressive in following a coach or a team. A one-time option the first year of the split included the choice of school for senior athletes to follow their teams. Some observed that schools became distinguished for a given sport because of the talent that somehow ended up at a school, at times reflecting placement of experienced coaches as well as where athletes opted to attend. One student observed that this ultimately sent certain teams to a particular school:

N9MSo: I know a bunch of football team members on East High's team last year and the year before that had actually moved so that they would stay with their same coach. . . . They might have actually gone to West.



In following their coaches, the restructuring prompted some students' families to move, leading to differences in athletic strengths across the schools. He likewise noted that some students' families moved to avoid an undesirable school, guessing that athletes he knew who ended up at East HS had avoided West HS. Another student gave a personal story of how she got to follow her track coach:

N11FS0: I'm on the track team and my coach went to North High, so I wanted to go to North High because I wanted to be on the track team. I didn't want to move with those. I went to North High so I could be on the track team.

The respondent who followed her track coach was able to go out of zone. She explained that even though her family had moved to a different zone she was able to be grandfathered into North HS because her siblings had once attended a North HS region's elementary school. She and other students noticed athletes' efforts to play for a certain school and knew there were varying degrees of school choice that allowed this to occur. Students who had not changed schools for athletics observed this as well:

E1MJr: It's the same thing with the soccer program, because like I know some students who were only like—I mean they were zoned for here with everybody. 'Cause like the better players—the better soccer players went over to North High. . . . Students who played a certain sport or were good in a certain sport wanted to pick and choose so that they went to the school that had the better program for that sport.

Many students noticed that athletes tended to use school choice and knew that to a certain extent this affected a school's athletics. More often than not, students used visible programs as criteria for assessing the schools—the lacks seen in teams would discourage athletes from choosing to attend a certain school. Taking this a step further, overall lacks in teams would indicate a

school's lacks. The long term consequences would be avoidance of a school that could not offer as many options or programs—something that would make it more difficult to build teams. If the two larger schools had advantages to building better teams faster, the West Side students became sensitive to another hierarchy operating in the schools that this athletic sorting highlighted. This referred to the choice of school originally given to athletes during the first year of the restructuring, which students across the schools knew about, N11FSO: “Yeah, most of the people I knew there were seniors—like the first graduating class—they got to choose which school they wanted to go to.” The first year of the restructuring seniors were allowed to select a school based on athletic teams they preferred so they could remain with their teams. According to her, they did not move to the zone where they attended school.

While this school choice option was only offered to seniors when the schools restructured, it also led to some confusion about how other athletes ended up in certain schools. As with discussions on enrollment and demographics of the schools, a younger group of West students addressed the exodus of students out of the old West to make the observations that this not only affected their athletic programs, but signaled how they were valued. Here, it is important to reiterate that confusion continually surfaced about the extent to which school choice operated in the system. Choice factored into how students explained differences in a variety of programs, and this was no less true for the building of athletic teams. For the youngest of the West students, they noticed that West Side male athletes had been attracted to the new schools to follow coaches, teammates, opportunities, or combinations of all three. But while this selection meant they had abandoned West by choosing one of the larger integrated schools, the idea of choice brought with it other ideas about who would end up in which school and why.

*“Garbage People”*

Confusion over the extent to which students had a choice of which school they could attend was particularly true when students examined which schools the good Black athletes from the West Side attended. That senior athletes had the option of selecting a school the first year of the split might have influenced the interpretation of this option by freshmen who had attended West MS. A few students believed that good Black athletes from the West Side were wanted by Whites for their school teams. One ninth grader believed these good athletes would return to West once their new building was built. He insisted this was not because of West’s new building. Instead, he revealed a hierarchy of people that he and his peers believed ranked West Side students, with the exception of athletes, as less:

W19MFr: Nope. That ain’t it . . . White people made them leave. They goin’ to try to—rezone the streets and stuff where all the good Black athletes stayed at and now they goin’ to the new schools. And therefore we’re—garbage people.

Interviewer: Where did you hear that term?

W19MFr: When we was at West Middle School. When we was like, in the sixth grade—seventh grade—something like that.

Interviewer: Somebody said that to you?

W19: Mm hmm. [affirmative] Kids—was going around saying it.

Others in the class echoed this observation of a hierarchy of persons and schools present in the system, but traced their understanding of this racial distinction back to their experiences with the all Black feeder middle school they had attended. Such distinctions labeled them as less or not wanted, which students portrayed through statements they knew community members—often peers—used to label their West Side schools. That other adolescents referred to them as

“garbage people” or leftovers was evidence that they, too, noticed the West Side students were not wanted. In their understanding, the good Black West Side athletes were sought out to attend the integrated schools; these were the students wanted by the other schools (and would be accepted by Whites).

There were other incidents that seemed to verify this hierarchy for the West Side students. Several made references to encounters at games where there were vast differences in the types of uniforms and equipment, and whether students had spirit packs that made the other teams look good in great contrast with their teams. They had the old equipment leftover from the old West, the old, worn uniforms, and quite often, no spirit packs. This was one of the first differences the younger students noticed about the schools, possibly because attending games gave them a picture of what it was like at the new schools. One student who was an athlete was especially aware of these differences:

W19MFr: East High get like, new jerseys, like every year. At West HS we be using the same jerseys for the same like, past two or three years. . . . Every time you see East HS play us in a different year they got new stuff on. And we come by there with the same old stuff on. And then they be like, “Oh! Look at West! They so old!” And everybody and the fans be like, “Oh, North High the tight brass! The tight--!” . . . . And everybody be looking at us—we the joke of the game. . . . All while we at the game—they’d be like, “Dog! That stuff old on ‘em or what!” And then they be like, “North High—Fresh!” “East High stuff—Fresh!”

From his reaction, peers’ comments at the games drew attention to school wide comparisons, athletic performance aside. This was a continual source of frustration and seemed to point out to them as well as to their peers that they were not as worthy--they did not have comparable support

in the visible ways the other schools did. The visible differences suggested that West HS was not trying hard enough and just could not build up their program—something peers at the other two schools tended to blame them for.

The West students, aware of the costs of equipment, uniforms, and spirit packs, wondered at all of the support the other two schools seemed to enjoy that they did not have. They saw they were “less” because each of these experiences told them as much. The visible artifacts of financial backing served as reminders of the differences in community support they witnessed and felt—athletes at integrated schools were taken care of while West HS athletes were neglected in many tangible ways.

### *Academics*

Many of the issues students spoke about regarding academics were identified in the consequences of West High’s low enrollment of the resources data area, so only a few others will be briefly presented here. It should be reiterated that students from all three schools brought up several ways they felt the restructuring affected their academic options, though again, these differed for West students because of the unique position of their school—especially its small size. The sub-areas of data for this section included (1) class sizes, and (2) course offerings, and (3) textbooks. Most mentioned by West students were course offerings—something closely intertwined with enrollment and scheduling. Importantly, this affected the level of academic rigor to which students had access.

#### *Class Size*

Students from all three schools talked about their surprise that with the restructuring, class sizes remained rather large. Many automatically assumed that the high schools were created to correct overcrowding, which for them meant they would then have small class sizes.

When students didn't see smaller classes, they expressed disappointment. One East HS student commented:

E8FJr: I don't understand like that's a more of an advantage because even though we have more schools we don't—we still don't have enough teachers and in most of my classes we're still crowded.

Two North HS students made similar observations about their school:

N9MSo: And it's already—classes are getting crowded again, so, the zoning was really bad. . . . Like the number of students in the class is getting a lot larger really quick.

N11FSO: Like, it was more people in our classes at North HS now than it was in our middle school classes [referring to the feeder middle school].

Students from the three schools commented that the great advantages of smaller schools seemed to have turned on them:

W12Jr: Other classes have thirty people. It's just us that don't have thirty people 'cause it's not thirty people in IB. That's why. This is—like, these other classes have like thirty-two and thirty-four.

W8FJr: 'Cause, no—they've got about fifty.

Students not only noticed the rather large class sizes, but assessed the extent to which learning was affected by class size:

W26FSr: I went to North HS for like a year and a half and the smallest class I had, had like twenty-five students in it. So the classrooms over there is at least from twenty-five to almost forty kids and it is easier to learn in a classroom with a smaller population of students 'cause the teacher gives you more time. They concentrate on you—what you not getting instead of, you know, having so many kids to worry about.

As this West HS student noted, class sizes at North HS were larger than at West—at least in the regular classes. This was not mere perception. The system’s Central Office had in fact initially assigned faculty to the three schools in a way that ensured smaller class sizes at West HS.

Students noted a positive effect on their opportunity to learn. Some West students realized that their class sizes were not always as large as those in other schools, which they knew benefitted them academically.

### *Course Offerings*

West HS did not offer as many courses that the other schools did, especially college track sections and AP levels. At times, constraints on scheduling also put the West students in a bind to get into those that were offered. It was strange for West students that West HS could receive students from the other two schools to benefit from special coursework while advanced West students would not be allowed to attend North HS to take a needed course:

W2MSr: But, you know, they could come over **HERE** [emphasizes “here”] to take the IB curriculum, but we cannot go over **THERE** [emphasizes “there”] to take a class that is open because they will not allow us to do that. Because, say—[stops] I needed a math class so I can get an Advanced Diploma. They did not allow me to do that and they stripped my Advanced Diploma.<sup>30</sup> So I just think that—the newest schools can have—they have it easier than we do because we’re not allowed to go over **THERE** because you have to go through—you have to get permission and all this red tape and we just get the “no” and they get the easy “yes” so they can come over here and take that class, that curriculum.

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<sup>30</sup> This senior was one of several students who missed out on advanced course offerings. He actually lost his Advanced Diploma because he lacked one advanced level math course his schedule did not allow him to take. The following year, teachers noted with alarm that West HS could no longer offer an Advanced Diploma (field notes, fall, 2006).

This inequality in the course offerings available to students at the three schools was interpreted as one more piece of evidence that West students' needs were neglected when the restructuring was planned. They were not expected to do well, so the system did not invest in them. These feelings increased with the perception that students at North HS and East HS could transfer easily into West for academic reasons,<sup>31</sup> but West students were not allowed to transfer to East High or North High for better academics. This participant ultimately lost his Advanced Diploma because he was denied permission to take the needed Advanced level course at North High.

The easy “yes” for northern students to attend West High drew attention to the idea that North HS parents would not want West HS students coming over. West students understood the stereotype of how they were viewed—even an advanced level student would not be welcome to North High if he were from West, though no students wishing to take Pre-IB courses at West would ever be denied a similar request based on the idea that they would be a threat. Equal access to academically rigorous courses across the schools would have indicated true equity, which as one student put it, would have made the restructuring legitimate.

### *Combining Classes*

One way the West HS administrators handled the challenges of providing higher level curriculum was to consolidate class offerings. Students from AP, IB, and Advanced courses often took the same class, though had differentiated assignments and tests according to course designation. This creative way to solve the lack of advanced level course opportunities came at a price, however, which students noticed:

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<sup>31</sup> West HS housed the International Baccalaureate Diploma Program. The system's preparatory courses (Pre-IB) for ninth and tenth grade (in place of the IB Middle Years program) were open to all students in the system. East HS and North HS students attended West HS for part of the day to take two courses, with the system transporting them from and back to their schools.



W26FSr: The classes kind of changed. . . . Like the advanced students, and the IB students and the AP students—we were all put into one class because there were not enough students to have separate classes. And that was kind of disappointing to a lot of the students when that happened, especially the IB students because, well that’s such an advanced program . . . They don’t want to have to slow down for Advanced students or AP students.

Students noted this problem with the extra small enrollment, though at times also observed that West High just could not offer what the other schools could. One student remarked:

W31FSr: And because of the enrollment and the number of people that are interested in the classes, there are many classes that they offer at the other high schools that they do not offer at West High School.

More specifically, one student noted that Advanced Placement coursework available at North High would have been helpful for her future college plans:

W5FSr: The reason my first choice would be [to attend] North High is because by what I hear, by what my teachers tell me, like—I’m an Advanced Placement student. And a lot of classes I was supposed to take, I wasn’t able to take ‘em because it wasn’t enough students to be in a class here and some of the teachers that used to teach it had moved to North HS and East HS. So no one could teach it—here. And like, enough students wasn’t here to get in the class for them to even try to hire someone to teach the class.

A lack of teachers was hard on programs, though she kept noticing that not enough students enrolled in AP courses to offer them. This, she believed, discouraged efforts to even hire a teacher for the course, a shocking allegation. It did not matter if there were teachers qualified or able to teach AP courses if there were not enough students to need such teachers anyway.

One of the ways that students made distinctions about the schools was whether they had unified math<sup>32</sup> courses. A North HS student confronted a West HS student about West only offering the lower level (split) math courses:

N11FSO: And y'all don't have Algebra I, do you?

W43FSO: Yes we do.

N11FSO: Oh, you do? But you all, you don't have

W43FSO: You only take it, like, one semester.

N11FSO: 'Cause my friend that I go to church with—she said she took Algebra I last year, like at West MS, and she said that she had to take it again or something like that because—something. She had to take it again 'cause they don't have the next level.

W43FSO: I guess her schedule probably didn't [stopped talking].

The West student was caught off guard by this remark and was left on the defense. She was aware of difficulties with course offerings in her extra small school, yet she had had access to and continued to take unified math courses. When confronted with information about another West student not having this option, her only defense was that scheduling difficulties might have forced this student to repeat her algebra course or end up in the split algebra course instead. This not only illustrated the informal social network from which students could access information about the schools, it provided hints at how they often drew comparisons from such knowledge. Importantly, this question about West's course offerings came as North High Pre IB students presented their reasons for why they would never transfer to West for the IB Diploma Program. In addition to disappointment over the much smaller clubs and limitations on extracurricular

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<sup>32</sup> Students from the northern middle school that fed North HS had accelerated tracks that allowed students to take Algebra in middle school. These students understood levels and sequences of math courses. Taking Algebra IA and Algebra IB meant completing Algebra I in double the time.

activities, the inference was that the academics would never come up to the standards of North HS. Here was concrete proof that West was “less” academically and the North HS students would still use such information to form their ideas about the undesirability of enrolling at West.

*They Want us to Fail*

Students from all the schools complained quite a bit about the lack of textbooks. Many felt that this should have been the priority that would have made the biggest impact in their quality of learning—even more than getting brand new computers or new buildings, which they harshly critiqued. Students listed consequences of not having textbooks, such as not doing as well in school or not passing the graduation exams. An outlier was from the youngest West participants. A few tied this lack to the racial separation of the schools, viewing this as an intentional way to set Black students up for failure—something that maybe Whites would want to do:

Interviewer: Have your parents talked with you about the restructuring?

W14MFr: Well that—they told me that they’re trying to put it all like it used to be. That all they told me. Just ‘cause the White folk don’t care about us. They want--they want to set us up for--failure. You know? And we ain’t got no books over here or nothing. We don’t have no books, we ain’t going to learn. We don’t learn, we’re going to sell drugs. If we sell drugs, we gonna be held in jail. . . . Then we have problems studying ‘cause we don’t have any textbooks.

This was a harsh accusation, though it was not mere speculation on his part. His father went to the board and also called the Central Office to see how they could get some textbooks for West. The student, curious about resources across the schools, then called his friend who attended another high school to see if they had textbooks—something he asserted they did—and for every

course. It was these comparisons and the social network that continued to feed their ideas that maybe people really were setting the West students up for failure. Other students believed that if White students attended their school or if they had maintained the large West they would not have this lack.

### *Summary of Academics*

Students noted ways in which the restructuring negatively impacted their access to academic opportunity through class sizes, course offerings, and textbooks. These all contributed to a sense that the restructuring had come at a price, though West students especially felt this unfairness. Students from all three schools sensed frustration with class sizes and lacks in books, though for the most part did not experience losses in access to curricular opportunities that West students often shared. As will be shown in the next data sub area, even the fact that they held the prestigious IB program seemed to conspire against them as community members' interpretations of an all Black school overwhelmed the great potential it could have offered to correct the academic losses that came through the creation of demographically unbalanced schools.

### *The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program*

Comparisons of course offerings, availability of text books, and general academic opportunities at the three new schools created by the restructuring were likely inevitable, and were no doubt expected by district administrators and teachers. There was at least one very controversial curricular difference that emerged between the campuses that was a surprise to the architects of the restructuring, one that revealed a great deal about the attitudes many school professionals and community members had about West high school and its students.

Prior to the restructuring, the unified West High school campuses had an International Baccalaureate Diploma Program, a prestigious and highly structured college bound curriculum

for only the most advanced students. In the initial stages of the restructuring, there seemed to be an assumption among administrators and community stake holders that this academic program could be placed at any of the three schools and that it would most likely end up at North HS or East HS. However, the program was chartered for West HS. And since the school that stayed in the old building retained the name “West,” the West IB office in New York ruled that the program had to stay at West High. The district protested and petitioned, but to no avail.

The irony that the district’s highest level academic program would be located at the school that was widely assumed to be the lowest academic achieving school, and that many students and teachers felt was being deliberately set up to fail, was not lost on stakeholders. For a brief period of time a few even entertained the hope that the presence of the IB program on the West campus might serve to prevent its academic and political marginalization. Such hopes, if they were ever widespread, soon evaporated as it became clear that the IB program at West would not receive clear and consistent support.

Instead, as system administrators, teachers, and parents struggled over what was to happen with the IB program in Rivertown schools decisions were made and things were said publicly that confirmed some of students’ worst impressions of how West High and West students were thought of by the community. Students commented on many aspects of the Pre-IB and IB curriculum at West that reinforced their sense of marginalization including (1) recruitment into the program, (2) debates about the location of the IB based on the actual and likely participation of students from all three schools, and (3) the cost of enrolling other students in the IB at West HS.

### *IB Recruitment*

West students were aware that certain faculty believed students in the western region were less capable of succeeding in the IB program than students at the other two middle schools. This was made evident in the way they recruited students into the program. These differences were mentioned by many students and teachers, but came into particularly high relief in one focus group comprised of students from all three middle schools who eventually ended up at West. As several described their recruitment for the IB program, even they were startled by the differences, which reflected the level of academic expectations adults had for each group.

Regarding the recruitment of students from West MS, one student reported:

W25FSr: All of the eighth graders were put in the cafeteria. And—at least at—down at West MS, that when they told us, it wasn't an, "Y'all get in it" thing. It was like, [imitates rough, male voice] "It's going to be hard. Don't get in it! It's going to be hard. Don't get in it!" That's what they . . . that's how it was when they came down to West MS. I guess because they didn't EXPECT [emphasizes "expect"]—as much of us to come—whether we were coming from West MS—to do it better—as the other two schools—the kids from East MS and North MS would do . . . I was a little upset, but I still went to a counselor. I went to our counselor down at West MS and I talked to her about it. And she signed me up for all my classes—where I could . . . take the IB.

She recalled being disturbed that they were discouraged from signing up for the Pre IB courses, though this highlighted the expectations held for students in West MS. Her personal stand and insistence paid off with ultimately being enrolled in the program. Another student from the West MS corroborated this tone of discouragement in the IB recruitment efforts there and its results of who ended up in the program:

W29MSr: And I know what she's talking about because like, when I was down there, there was like—"Y'all, it ain't what y'all's used to," and all this stuff. And so, everyone is like, "Well, they—." But, like they was just saying, it's not for us. And then, so everyone was like, "Well, we ain't going to get in." And I got in and that's how I met her [points to peer]. . . . When I got to ninth grade, it was like three or four of us that were from West MS that got into the IB program [referring to the Pre-IB classes].

Interview: Only three or four out of the whole school?

W29MSr: All we had from West MS was three or four.

He, too, recalled the message of discouragement by recruiters at West MS, but also recalled reactions of his peers to the presentation—opting out of considering the program. Neither student mentioned hearing the long term benefits the program would offer in exchange for their efforts. The end result was a low representation from West MS participants in Pre IB classes during the last year of the big West High—an argument some made as to why the program would most likely disappear.

One student who had attended North MS relayed a very different recruitment experience. Unlike her peers from West MS, she recalled being strongly encouraged to enroll in the IB:

W1FSr: To what [Name] was saying—that's just how—you could see just how segregated they are 'cause she said they went to West MS, it was like, "Oh, it's going to be hard," all like that. When they came to North MS, the girl was like, [imitates a girly student voice] "Oh, you've got to get into the IB program. It's a lot of opportunities!" You know, "You could do it!" You know, doing this getting up all of your spirits and stuff like-- [changes to own voice] "Oh, okay! I can go to IB program," and just, you

know, get all these scholarships and everything. I mean, it was the total opposite what they told [names peer from West MS].

A student in the same focus group who attended East Middle school reported a similar encouraging approach for recruitment into the IB program:

W44FSr: [Sighs] Well, I took class with a whole bunch of White people . . . They didn't say what they said at West Middle School. No. No. No. It was like, [bursts into a cheerleader type tone] "The smart, smart kids—y'all come and be in IB and AP classes! Go get those scholarships! Get that! Get that! Get into a good college! Go get into Harvard and Princeton!" and all that. "Go and get in that class!" [quiets voice] They didn't say what they told those people. No.

At this piece of information, another student summarized the overall message of the recruitment:

W2MSr: It seems like they were trying to discourage West MS from entering the program—while encouraging the North MS and East MS.

These students were reporting on events that had happened before the high schools were restructured, though after the middle schools had been restructured. The difference in the recruitment messages they received signaled to these West students the ways in which the zones in the early stages of the restructuring were already viewed and treated unequally.

### *IB Location*

In addition to the differences students saw in the way district personnel recruited them into the IB program, there was also a public conversation happening in the papers and at board meetings about where the IB program should be located. Despite the fact that the National IB office had made it clear the IB program would stay at the new West HS, this didn't prevent students and community members from objecting to this decision.



Realizing the level of its academic rigor students expressed amazement that the IB had been placed at West. The program easily would have been located at the most academically oriented high school, which would not be West High:

W3FSr: It's like because, at one point, you see they was talking about taking it—taking the IB program out of the city schools. And it seemed like to me in a way like they're trying to take it away from West and they want to put it at the other schools. You already felt that, when you first split up that they wanted to—it was like, you was thinking, “Well the IB program if possible—if at any school, you would think, in the school system now it would be at North High if . . . anything.”

West students sensed that there was interest removing the IB from their school. With renewed interest in the program after a neighboring IB school made the front page of *Newsweek* magazine in April 2005, this debate surfaced in community conversations. North High students believed that placing the IB at West HS was a bad administrative decision because the program would just die out:

N9MSo: The restructuring program just completely wiped out IB.

N10FSO: I know.

N12FSO: Yes.

N9MSO: Because, I mean, no offense to West or anything, but the students that are still here do not care about the IB program with the exception of maybe . . . seven, eight.

[laughs] None of them are doing the IB program next year. The actual IB program! And I think it's just sort of a waste. . . . and it's just a waste because—I *know* [emphasizes “know”] that there will be a lot more people who would take it if it was at North High because

N12FSo: [softly] Yeah.

According to this student plenty of people at North HS who would enroll in the IB program, but only if it were located there. He insisted that the IB program was wasted by being placed at West. West students showed no interest, he argued, unlike many of the North HS students he knew. Though hesitant, he did offer what he believed was the root problem of placing the IB at West, N9MSo: “I’m not trying to be a bigot or anything. But East HS and West HS don’t have the same—aren’t up to the same academic standards as North HS’s is.”

These students struggled to express their frustration with the placement of the IB Program while acknowledging the unfairness they saw in the new arrangement of the high schools. In this effort, however, they signaled the way the IB debate had become racial in their understanding:

N11FSo: It’s like having, when they rezoned, like what she said—it’s unequal rezoning and stuff like that. Like, really the Black—like having to be like West—like it’s all Black.

N12FSo: Yeah, it’s kind of segregated.

N11FSo: Yeah, and like East HS is like, the middle school or whatever. But like North HS is mostly White so it would make more sense to put the IB Program where people want to take it instead of having all those West—I mean North people come over here to take the classes and it’s only a few that want it at West.

In the above exchange one student who supported the view that the IB would be most sought out by students at the North HS linked this to the racial demographics of the schools. Because West had fewer Whites than the northern school, it would not be the optimum location for the IB. West’s all Black student population was reason to remove this high academic program from

West. They were not academically oriented like the North High students, something she attributed to the Whiteness of North HS. A peer confronted her about the racial composition of the northern high school—it was not that White. She then made this corrective. Admittedly, it was not a “White” school, but in her understanding, the degree of Whiteness seemed to influence interest in the IB. She conceded with her peers that it was not a majority White school, but held her ground regarding interest based on Whiteness: “N11FS0: Well it is half and half, but it’s like more people at North High want to take those classes.”

West students were also aware of the typical demography of a high level academic program. The expectation, they observed, would be that such a prestigious program would never be found in a school such as West:

W12FJr: Being on this side of town you would think that—. Who would think—if you didn’t know? . . . But if someone just came and they were from Canada—anywhere, you know, they came to Rivertown, Alabama, and they looked at this school and they looked at North HS, and East HS, and [names two large successful county schools]—you know—they wouldn’t think that this school has the IB Program, with the surroundings and all that, you know. With—if they came and looked at our student body they wouldn’t probably think that we—that we were the only school that has the IB program. This student highlighted that an area of a city would immediately speak to an outsider as to the likely curriculum its schools would have. She never said that West students were not capable of the IB. She did infer, however, that the expectation for their student body and their area of the city would not likely include a curriculum like the IB.

At the end of their interview, one North High student reconsidered her position after the group had seen the zone map and realized that differences such as enrollment size might also be

working against West. The students were shocked to see the vast area their school zone encompassed—it was overwhelmingly much larger than West’s zone, and even larger than the East HS zone. She ventured to suggest that perhaps the fairest solution would be to place all programs like the IB at all three schools:

N12FSo: Yes, but then the problem is for West. Like—they cannot really—it will not work for West if—nobody will really join it. And then it’s kind of—yet it’s like—already most of them are African Americans and it’s kind of segregated and it’s—and you know, nobody really wants to transfer to West.

This student struggled with her conclusion that West students would never participate in the IB program and seemed caught in a web of contradiction. On the one hand, with not enough West students currently taking the IB, it would be the school that would eventually lose the program—according to her line of reasoning. But keeping the IB would require that others to transfer to West to help build the program back up, yet this was not an option they accepted. In her admittance, students did not want to attend West HS—not even to take the coveted IB. Sadly, West students had been segregated through the restructuring—something that was not their fault, but still, she and others believed they were not the kind of students to take IB.

System leaders eventually reached a compromise with parents to offer the Pre-IB curriculum at West that North HS and East HS students could be bussed over to take during two block courses every day. This permitted the students to take a half-day of Pre-IB courses, but also retain membership in their school’s extracurricular clubs and teams. Only when students reached the junior year, would they have to choose to transfer to West HS full time to participate in the program. This compromise suggested reluctance on the part of East HS and North HS students to enroll at West. If they wanted the IB curriculum why not transfer to West as

freshmen? West students knew the Pre IB students had not chosen to enroll at West. But this led to much speculation about whether they would enroll at West for the IB diploma classes the coming year.

Most West students focused on the fact that bussed in students would have to enroll for the IB diploma courses. But this fact was not that simple given how people viewed an all Black school located in the Black working class sector of the city. Another student knew of conflicts that had surfaced at a parent interest meeting about this:

W2FJr: They had a big mess about that because some of the parents wanted the IB program over to their schools because they didn't want to come over to West, so they had kind of a big mess with that. But, I mean, they couldn't have it because there were some things that said they couldn't have it.

West students knew of parents' reluctance to send their children to West for the IB. They also saw the possibility that these parents would try to move the program:

W12FJr: And, because West is the only school that offers the IB program, the students from North HS have to be bussed over here. And--I don't know. It affects the school, because--some of the parents don't want the students to come to West.

W34MJr: I think, you know, well like [Name] said, some of the parents—don't want their children coming over to West. So—and like before, during the summer, they tried to take away the IB program from West and get it at their schools.

The West students were aware that bussed in students would probably not enroll at West to take the IB, though attributed this choice to their parents. A few students tied this reaction to these parents' efforts to move the IB out of West. Parents and students obviously were attracted to the

IB, but it seemed they did not want to attend West HS. Despite efforts to recruit students from the other high schools, the West students noticed that this was not happening.

Still, North HS students stated the interest they and peers had in the IB, preferring the IB curriculum to AP courses:

N10FSo: I think I would get more. It's also supposed to be like, I don't know, I've just heard this—it's more rigorous than the AP. AP is supposed to be a lot easier. And that's not what I want. [laughs]

N9MSo: More rigorous and broader because like we're supposed—Our twelfth grade class for AP is going to be US Government and Economics and the IB course the same year would be World Economics and World Government, I think, so you just get a broader view.

The North students were aware of advantages to taking the IB diploma courses, and actually stated this as their preference. As they considered their future options, however, they gave reasons for why despite its advantages, they would forego the IB:

N12FSo: We have to transfer to West to be in IB program in junior year.

N9MSo: Right. This is only Pre-IB. Because the—next year I don't think any of us are doing IB because—we're not going to transfer to West. [students laugh]

N12FSo: Well, I was seriously considering transferring. But I decided kind of not to 'cause it seems like in West they don't have nice clubs. Like, they have clubs, but it seems like it's not really working as well as in North High.

N10FSo: [Names a Pre IB peer] and I are really into Spanish Club.

N12FSo: We have about eighty people now . . . About—yeah. Like, only people who are taking Spanish this year can be in Spanish Club.

N10FS0: And I would also miss—I'm in newspaper and the West newspaper is not [eyes all move to a West student's face to watch her reaction] [laughs from group] a newspaper. [laughs] Okay, it's not a newspaper like a printed newspaper. It's not the same—programs. It's not the same type of program as there is a North High . . . We have a sixteen-page paper and it comes out about every two months and I just think it's a good class. Like—we learn a lot. Actually, we do articles—actually newspaper articles and journalistic style and you learn a lot, you know, about the style.

West's smallness had affected extracurricular activities in ways that guaranteed students from North HS and East HS would not be drawn to West. The one program that might have been able to counter the negatives of an all Black school serving predominately working class children had no chances.

Why Whites would not enroll for the IB diploma courses at West remained an unanswered question for West students. They could only speculate as to why the IB was not sought after by White families who they believed would normally want such a program for their children. One student picked up from parent discussion at the system's IB interest meeting that people did not want to send their children to West—not even to an academically elite program. She understood that it was not just because of danger, but because of the perception that West students were not motivated to learn:

W6FSr: Because that's—my younger sister—she's in the ninth grade and she's in the Pre-IB Program. And that was the issue at one of the meetings. A parent was talking at a meeting they had and she was saying well she feels that it would be better if—her child goes to North High, so I guess they want—the majority of the people—their kids go to North High. So I guess they were trying to say that it would be best if they moved the IB

Program to North High because they don't feel that their kids should have to come over here and be in the same school with people who aren't motivated to learn and that's really not true.

West students were aware of the reasons White parents had for not sending their children to West to take the IB. Some felt that if possible, the IB program would be moved to accommodate their wishes. All of this signaled to them that something was wrong. People were avoiding West HS, even despite its housing a curriculum that most Whites would otherwise have sought for their children.

### *Summary of the IB*

In this section, comparisons of IB recruitment the middle schools confirmed for West students that educators' expectations for them were much lower than their peers. They also sensed that the IB was in a precarious position—White parents seemed intent on removing this program from their school. While West students knew there was general avoidance by parents to send their children to West, this was the one way—in fact the only way--they felt they could have some diversity at their school. Here the great dilemma surfaced that despite the IB's attractiveness, high achieving students most likely would not transfer to West to take it. Pre IB students expressed a preference for the IB over AP, yet listed West High's great lacks in clubs and special programs that North HS offered as reason not to enroll. The vast differences in resources that helped North HS quickly build up coveted programs from the former West school now worked against the IB. High achieving students would want both—something the unfairness of how the restructured schools were designed would make difficult to correct. The one hope of having diversity evaporated for the West students, though they still talked about the



great need they had to correct this aspect of their schooling experience, which is addressed in the final subarea of data, the hidden curriculum of diversity.

*The Hidden Curriculum of Diversity*

West students who ventured into joint settings with students from all three schools to participate in technology courses or special opportunities believed they were seen as “different” because they attended the all Black school. While many believed that representing the all Black school as someone interested in various educational opportunities was important, it often seemed to come at great personal expense as they sensed a spectacle-like reaction towards them. This placed a burden upon West students, as they carried stereotypes superimposed upon all those attending West HS.

When seniors from the schools considered what the restructured high schools offered in terms of improvement over the former big West they often drew blanks. They could often point to serious lacks, though, one of the greatest of which was less diversity. They recalled their experience of attending the big West during ninth grade as one that had taught them the importance of exposure to many others, which they highly valued. This, they felt, was a great advantage of the old West, and some expressed concern over what the lack of exposure now meant for students:

N5MSr: I would never have even met anyone from West or East High unless I took a class at TCT. That would be the only way that I would even meet ‘em. . . . [the old ] West was such an opportunity to meet new people—not that you got to be the best of friends with people from other schools but it just gave you an opportunity to know some more people and be kind of a bigger group and get outside of just your school. But now,

we basically have constricted everybody to going through their education with the same group of people.

West HS students likewise felt the restriction of attending a high school that was far too much like middle school. The restructured schools were a disappointment to many when they thought about the limited experiences they now had in meeting new students. None of the students from the integrated schools, however, ever mentioned that this would hinder their preparation for the future. In contrast, West students seemed keenly aware of the need for interaction with others in preparation for work, post-secondary education, and entering mainstream society dominated by Whites—never mind living in a global society. All of this socialization was something high school would no longer provide for them as the old West once had:

W45MSr: Well another disadvantage, going back to what [Name] said, yes, the neighborhood schools will be good because you won't have to adjust, but they will also be a hindrance in later on in life 'cause you will soon have to adjust one day and

W2MSr: [cuts in] You wouldn't know how to interact with other people.

W45MSr: You wouldn't know how to interact with other people, like when you go to college or when you get on the job site. You wouldn't know how to react with other people.

As Black students in an all Black community attending only Black schools from kindergarten through graduation, they felt this severely limited their preparation for mainstream society—the word “hindrance” stands out as they considered their futures. Students from all three schools made the point of having a narrower scope of opportunities to meet others in high schools with only one feeder middle school. For West students, however, this created a racial isolation they

knew was detrimental to their preparation for their lives after graduation. They now never had any contact with anyone other than Black peers who lived in their own neighborhoods for their entire schooling trajectory. Interestingly, even without experience with other “races” they believed this was an important part of growth—both intellectual and in terms of social preparation.

Older students had various experiences with integrated settings and used this to assess the new high school context. They tied contact with new students to valuable learning, especially in terms of exposure to different perspectives:

W12FJr: I just want different perspectives in our school. We don’t have enough diversity. I think we should have. . . . And then it’s not just White people, I think, because we have White students here. It’s not the color. It has nothing to do with race or anything.

To provide an indication of the desperateness to break out of their insulated student population this same student stated that even adding just a few new Black students would be a welcome change that would contribute to their intellectual growth as it would add a difference in perspectives during class debates and discussions:

W12FJr: I really say White kids but it’s really not about White or Black. I mean they could bring like twelve new Black kids to our school. It wouldn’t even matter. It’s just the perspectives that I want to hear. I’m tired of the same thing. You always hear the same thing, the same basis for your ideas. I just want a different basis for the perspective. You know—just something different. I’m just tired of the same old things.

She recognized that different backgrounds would enhance class discussions through new perspectives—something that over time disappeared as they remained with the same small group

of peers. In this way, West students often went beyond the “fun” aspect of meeting others (the usual reason students in the integrated schools wanted the big West experience) to include important intellectual and social growth gained only through social contact to which they no longer had access.

But what was it that students saw as so important in social interactions with others of different racial and ethnic backgrounds? They would learn from others, yes, but what seemed important for students was just acquiring confidence to “talk” with people from differing backgrounds:

W33MFr: I think that well, if we do meet different people, it’ll teach us how to interact and not just keep to ourself. It’ll teach us how to meet different people and how to associate with them.

W48FFr: It’ll teach us how to associate with other races instead of just the same.

While learning from others was important, something vital to them was to know how to just talk with others, and when they used the term “races” it seemed to transcend differences in intellectual interests to encompass differences perpetuated through the macro social context of racial isolation. They did not feel prepared to handle such interaction —something that only experience could teach them. For West students, school should provide opportunities that living in segregated housing patterns could never provide.

Older students echoed similar concerns, again, highlighting the importance of exposure to socializing with people from a broad variety of backgrounds:

W38MJr: You just seein’ your own race—during your whole—high school life. You probably won’t even be prepared like when you go to get a job or something—you know, like how to socialize with somebody that’s different from you. And ‘cause you’ve been

with your one race for a long time you won't know how to um like, you know, talk to—  
talk to—act towards another . . . culture.

W8FJra: You're not culturally diverse.

Though West students felt it would be interesting and exciting to get to know other people, a look at their reality led them to sense that they were not as well prepared to face the world of work, a cause of concern for them.

### *Busing Revisited*

For some West students, the lack of diversity was a problem that should have been solved and actually had a solution. If Black students were already bused over to North HS, they wondered why the converse did not take place:

W5FSr: If they can send West Side Black kids and different neighborhoods of Black kids all the way to North HS for it to be a mixed race, then why can't you send some White kids over here then, since you want to rezone it in a weird way? Why not rezone other--other areas with White kids in it to send them to West HS?

For the students, integrated schools were still important. As she understood it, the zoning bussed students from the West Side for the purpose of integrating North High, yet this was not done to integrate their school. Furthermore, White students were bussed for part of the day to West to take Pre IB courses, making busing an acceptable alternative:

W12FJr: If they had to like bus kids over to this side of town, I don't see what would be the problem. They bus kids from North HS . . . for a whole semester to come for two periods. So I think—so they can bus kids over here for an entire day of school. . . . I feel like when it comes to diversity, we're just getting the short end of the stick.

There was confusion about the purposes of zoning. Somehow, it benefited North HS and not West HS. Yet, if White students could benefit by attending West HS for the IB program, why couldn't more White students be bussed over so that West students could benefit by attending school with them? Then the restructuring would be legitimate.

Students at the integrated schools had the luxury of talking about diversity in terms of meeting more people, as the old West provided. But West students had a different experience and meaning with diversity. West was the all Black school, and as such, people responded to it and its students in terms of this distinction. At times, this special category led to a kind of “othering” of West students in mixed groupings. One student recalled her experience at a function with parents and students from all three schools. She had been selected to participate in a prestigious joint educational activity with representatives from the three schools, though she was the only student from West. In the parent meeting she felt gaping stares at her, which she attributed to the strangeness of having come from West, a place from which no one would have expected such a level of excellence to come:

W11FJr: I remember when I had went to [a special program] I was—I was the only person from West. And it was fourteen from North High, and three from East High and it's one me. And so, [laughs] I remember from all the meetings—all the people from North HS just chatting with each other. All the people from East HS just chatting with each other. I was like, just sitting in the very back with my mom and my dad. And then, I remember every time [Advisor] would stand up and say, “[Name] from West HS,” everybody would just look back [gestures by completely turning her head and opening eyes wide to illustrate this] and just look at me—all the parents and everything. I was

just like [she moves forward with wide eyes in surprise] What????!! I mean, [louder]  
WHAT?

Interviewer: What, what did the look—“looking back at” mean for you?

W11FJr: Like—“What you doing here?” I mean, “Why are you even here? It’s only one of you?” And then, [names advisor] is like, I’m in the IB program. All of them just like—[gestures the exaggerated turning around of head, hitting her palms down on desk top, and makes wide-eyed stares again]. I’m like, what’s the big deal? . . . I mean, I’m just from West HS and—they’re from West HS too. I mean they’re past sisters too, I mean. So, what’s the big deal?

She was the only representative from West HS, which stood out, though she felt even then that people expected she would not fit in with this level of students. Even if this was not the way people viewed her and her family, she felt scrutinized to qualify for this program. In the old unified school arrangement, this would not have happened. They all had come from the big former West and should have shared some measure of equality. The all Black West was seen as the “other” school that is different—or at least she felt that this made peers and their families saw her as “different” while her peers fit into the group.

She continued her interpretation of what took place. Even as an IB student and a participant selected for this special opportunity, this touched on the aspect of stereotypes she felt were placed on students attending West HS:

W11FJr: And then I guess the people at North HS thought that I was kind of like a “Hootchie” [gestures quotation marks] per say, or “fast,” [gestures quotations marks] in their type of words. Like I was like kind of “wild” per se. And so when they go to like really know me or whatever they saw that West people—some students at West are not

“as wild” [gestures quotation marks] as they thought they were. And so, we got along and so now they see that some people at West can be

Female voice: [supplies word] Regular.

W11FJr: Yeah—the norm.

Her interpretation of the stares was how West HS females would stereotypically be viewed by Whites—coming from West, she must be “fast.” Whether true or not, she believed she had to prove herself to undo their negative perceptions and gain their acceptance. This, she thought, would also prove to the greater community that some students at West are not “wild” as urban Black students are stereotypically viewed. She could not separate her personal identity from what her school would inscribe upon her and her peers. They were not regular or the norm, like those students attending the integrated schools.

In a different focus group, West students expressed a similar experience with Pre IB students who were bused to West HS from North HS:

W41FJr: Just like when we had—we had the IB program over here. People from North HS and East HS had to come over here and when they get off that bus, they look at us like we some

W25FJr: Like we dirty. Like we just nasty or something!

Interviewer: You can tell by their looks?

W25FJr: By their looks!

The Pre IB students only came for two courses and then left, and since these classes separated students by academic track, there would be no opportunities for interactions. They would observe each other as they walked to class, however. Still, West HS students felt they were the



object of a judgmental gaze. Their interpretation of the stares was the sense that they were seen as lower or less by their peers.

*West is Less*

One freshman tried to explain the sense of being looked down on, which she attributed to the fact that West HS had no other races at their school:

W25FFr: I think people think their school is better than ours because we mostly have—Black students and so they have different races and so they think just because West is all little Black kids at this school, they don't have enough money or something. They just think they're better than us. And it's like a lot of kids that aren't—that stuff. They *show* it [emphasizes “show”]. They don't say it, they just show it—how their attitudes be--and how they look at us and stuff.

This student identified being less in terms of socioeconomic status, which was quickly intertwined with race and assumptions based upon being Black and living near West HS. These two factors marked them and their school as “less” automatically. She felt this was how people reacted to West students—part of which included being stared at. When asked to explain how she noticed this attitude, she traced it back to her experiences at the technology center where she interacted with students from the integrated schools:

W25FFr: The technology center's a school where you can meet different people, but, when people—I guess when people from West or where people are from—just really all Black students who have a couple of other races, but just mostly Black students—when they come—they just look down on us 'cause—I don't know why they look down on us, but they do that.

This student groped with how to specify the distinction she felt marked students from West, but she clearly sensed that West students were seen as less than peers from the other two schools because they attended the all Black school. She felt that other students assumed there was a hierarchy that they then reinforced in their interactions with her. They were better; she was less. This, she believed, would hold true for anyone who came from a predominately or all Black school such as West's when encountering students from the norm—integrated schools that other races attended. Having mostly or only Black students was automatically seen as being lower in a social hierarchy.

Students at East HS talked about the high degree of social interaction they had despite race and economic differences. One student felt this was because they came from neighborhoods that were better mixed in terms of race and socioeconomic status, unlike the North HS students' homes which because they were racially isolated made it difficult for White students to interact with their Black peers:

E14FSO: I think that the students are mixed in--like Black and White because you have [middle class subdivision] right next door and then you have [working class Black area] kind of sort of right down the street. And so it's just mixed in really well. . . . But—it's just because of this. The places where they live are mixed in really well right here.

Still, with the better racial integration at East, where students often referred to themselves as “the mix,” this did not mean they would be as generous in how they regarded Black peers from West HS. One student felt that East did not ascribe to a hierarchy of persons, precisely because they respected each other for all of the hard work it took for them to be where they were. But this still distinguished them from West families—East HS families had better morals and worked harder, and although West HS families would work, it was not quite the same:

E11FSo: Another reason like that is because like our parents are like the working class. Like not like the business rich class. Not like—I mean West—they have working class parents too, but ours—they are, like, hard-working. They have morals and they teach us. They discipline us, like, really well.

The ascription of less for West HS and its students was extended to mean their families, reflecting a cultural deficit she believed made them less.

### *Diversity for West*

In a different focus group, a student considered the extent to which Whites would choose to come to West given the fact that almost none were zoned for their school. In some students' observations, perhaps only the IB would draw White students to West:

W30FSr: I think that the only way that we'll have [White] students at West is because of the IB Program. . . . So it might help West have White students—not only just Black. . . . That's the only possible way that we would have White students is because of the IB program. . . . So that's probably going to help have White students—the IB Program.

While many West students had noticed and pointed out ways in which they had been materially shortchanged, one student identified the most pressing problem that West students faced as its lack of diversity:

W3FJr: When I was at [all Black school] in the fifth grade--and I know they decided to split the schools up. And when they did, they already knew automatically that—I could tell you the racial demographics of the school just like that [snaps fingers]. Because, I just felt--I was like, "Okay." I thought when I was in the fifth grade [1998-1999], "Okay, I'm going to West MS. Okay, I'm going to meet different people from different schools. I get to meet people diverse. I get to see somebody other than a *Black person*."

[Emphasized “Black person”] Because, my whole—the whole time I was in elementary school, I can count the number of minorities with--Whites or other races and Blacks--on *one hand* that I have been to school with.... And that’s sad to say out of—from kindergarten to fifth grade on—my hands. And then, when I came to West MS it was the same thing. . . You just ran into the other feeder [elementary] schools. They were also the same way. . . . So when I got to West HS in the ninth grade I was like, “Okay—different people.” You got to meet—you got to mingle and see different people and just—you don’t have to be around them, but just to be knowing that they’re present and that they’re there—that’s a lot.

Like many upper classmen, this student associated the entire restructuring with racial isolation. Her awareness of this began with elementary school, and her notice of this as opportunities to attend school with others was continually removed from her path highlights the significance many West students gave to missing out on contact with a diverse group of peers though school.

#### *All Black or No Whites?*

West students lamented that theirs was the school that was so different from the other two because of its demographics. The label of “all Black” was frequently used to reference West High in conversations as well as newspaper reportage, but for one West student, this nomenclature did injustice to the social context of their school:

W12FJr: They’re just saying, “It’s all Black kids. It’s all Black kids.” Why aren’t you that it’s “No White kids”? Don’t just say, “It’s all Black kids.” If it’s all Black kids then there’s no—then you’re being racist to someone else. If it’s all Black kids over here, then what about the White kids that maybe want to be over here that are not here? What about the Asians, the Hispanics that want to be over here that are not here? Don’t just speak

about the Black kids that are here. Speak about the people that aren't here. They always just say who's here, who's here, who's here [gestures three spaces on table with hands]. But—when you say who's here, they're here so what's the problem? That's not the problem. We need other people here.

This student's assessment of the lack of diversity framed West's dilemma in a different light by highlighting who was *not* in the West building as the problem. Her point—"all Black" was not always bad:

W12FJr: They say it like, "It's all Black kids over here. It's all Black kids over here." When they go home, it's all Black people in their homes. In their neighborhood, it's all Black people in their neighborhood. Throughout their community it's all Black people. So what's the big deal about the Black people? It's not the point that it's full of Black people. The point is they're not the White people or Asians or Hispanics.

She was fine with being in an all Black community and happy to return home to her all Black family, but returned to the social context of schooling—an all Black school was lacking in diversity this shortchanged their educational experiences:

W12FJr: It does upset me about that it's, you know, all Black kids over here and, you know, it's majority White over there. . . . I feel like this should be—it should be more diverse than this. If there are not any White people here, I think there should be Asian—something! Anything—you know. But it should be more than one race attending this high school because other schools—they have racial diversity. That's what I'm screaming. It's not about all Black kids being here because I'm used to Black people. The White people here are used to Black people . . . At West Elementary I had White

friends, I had Black friends. That's what I miss about elementary school. Once I left elementary school, my racial diversity was—none!

West students often expressed concern and disappointment that their school was so lacking in diversity, something they felt shortchanged their educational experiences. Having an all Black school seemed neither fair nor wise, given the increasing importance of being prepared to work and study in the real world. Some noted the disadvantages they would face because of the lack of interaction with students from other sociocultural backgrounds. Diversity, or lack thereof, held significance for their futures—a consequence they felt peers in the integrated schools would not suffer.

#### Chapter 4 Summary

By the end of their group interview students often came to the conclusion that there were far more disadvantages to advantages in the switch to multiple high schools. Many faults and drawbacks were mentioned and discussed by students, with very little if any advantages to the split. As one student surmised towards the end of an interview:

E12FSo: Overall, I really don't like it. I think that everyone was kind of hurt by this. Like, everything inside the schools—the teachers, the clubs, the sports, like the students—I think everyone was pretty much affected—badly.

There were many aspects of the restructuring that in students' eyes had lessened the quality of education previously available under the former big West. But this was particularly true for the students attending West HS. They suffered the immediate ascription of being regarded and treated as less through the racial division of the schools. West HS students interpreted this to mean they were the undesired students in the system—the ones who needed to be separated from everyone else. This was confirmed by how the restructuring had taken place

(through the middle and high school splits) but also because of how the West students suspected the projected rezoning would transpire. They heard that the integrated schools were “too Black” and that leaders would correct this by removing West Side students from the integrated schools and back to West HS.

Peers from East and North did not have this experience or this level of analysis of the restructuring, though felt shame and regret that the racial division seemed to polarize the city into an all familiar context that reflected the historical racist ideals of the region, state, and city. Some felt that civic participation could not undo the control of elite people in positions of leadership whose decisions reflected a preference for racial separation. The schools would deeply entrench the practice of *de facto* housing segregation as people moved to zones to select a school or avoid one. They often identified West HS as the bad school and the West students as lacking; some agreed that the lack of outcomes proved this idea was true while others disagreed with it even if they felt this was the common view of community members. Still, it was usually easy for them to believe that somehow the West students just did not try as hard or seem as academically engaged.

From every way the West students looked at it, the restructuring was unequal because it told them so. West students read this social text that told them they were less into every aspect of the restructuring. Although the resources of the building timeline, community donations, and enrollment were material components of the restructuring, many students felt that these operated through the symbolic—reflecting a hierarchy of which students in the system were valued and deemed worthy of support.

The confusion about school choice fed many perspectives these adolescents had about zoning, including the degree to which one had to obey its mandates. People can move. People

can request a transfer. People can use a second address. People—especially Whites--can request special consideration to attend a school of choice, which was usually a Whiter, wealthier school. People could switch out because of No Child Left Behind transfers, though this only seemed to punish West unfairly rather than help it in ways students believed were imperative to its success—higher enrollment and greater support rather than abandonment. All of this led the students to accept the idea that zone lines did not limit one's choice of school. This was crucial for the West students, as it signified that theirs differed from the integrated schools as it was not a school of choice. Suspecting that equality was not true, an analysis of the school demographics and resource allocation confirmed this.

Who would want to come and be a part of their school? Equally important, who wouldn't come—and why not? West students traced many curricular and extracurricular problems they experienced back to the low enrollment at West, which surfaced contradictions about zoning restrictions. If there was an element of school choice, which many believed, then their low enrollment was an indication that they were less because other students, especially White, ultimately did not choose to attend their school. Despite zone restrictions, some provided examples of peers—neighbors (though this could have included relatives) they knew of who would probably switch to the new West once it was completed as though this were an easy thing to do. Much of school assignment was, in their minds, still a matter of choice.

West students identified low enrollment as causing multiple problems with academic and other opportunities. Nevertheless, students needed an explanation to understand why West High's enrollment remained so low, and more specifically, why only Black students made up their enrollment if the schools were in fact equal and reflective of choice. Students knew that not just many White students but students from other countries had attended the former West. The



other two schools had diversity—part of which was due to West Side students being bused to those schools. Why couldn't they have this diversity too, especially if this type of experience was so highly valued in terms of preparing one for post-secondary institutions and work in a global society? Worse yet, parents would not choose to send their children to all Black schools, as they would not provide a context of diversity. Some thought that housing the prestigious IB program would attract students to West, as White families usually sought the best curriculum for their children. When this did not happen, the realization surfaced that something more than the lack of diversity clouded their school's image, and this was what they seemed intent on correcting.

West's much smaller enrollment was particularly hard on programs, leading West students to consider why this remained so low. Their explanation for the lopsided enrollment pattern across the schools led them to the frustrating conclusion that an all Black school would not only be avoided by many parents, it would also be seen as bad even in the absence of bad incidents. Without any evidence of bad incidents, they concluded that the crime that had taken place in their area, along with proximity to housing projects, would mark their school as bad. Ultimately the restructuring constructed West HS as the bad school and those students attending it as the bad Black kids. Students explained this through the images they felt the schools had, though for West students and even some of their peers at the other schools, West HS students did not need to do anything bad to make their school bad. West students continually were confronted in the community with parents and peers who considered theirs to be a ghetto school—one that was dangerous and full of fighting adolescents disengaged with academics. They attributed this perception to biases in the media that seemed to not only confirm to the West students the sense that community members believed this about their school, but further

inscribed this status on them. Even without serious negative events, there was little likelihood that West HS could be anything but bad. Other ideas students read from the social text of racial exclusion were interpretations that West Side students were leftovers or garbage people who were not wanted and had to be separated out in case they were dangerous. These were lessons they learned that all had explanations. Though the students disagreed with these, they could not prevent others from thinking this way about them.

They noted that the structure of the schools guaranteed that theirs would have the lowest test scores, that it would not have comparable teams, and that it could not offer the same activities and extracurricular programs. These material effects all reinscribed the symbolic—the comparative differences between the integrated schools and the all Black school would only further confirm to peers and community members that West students and their families were lacking. These were all findings present throughout the data that all pointed to this same conclusion.

The next chapter, Chapter 5, provides a cross case analysis of the data areas. That chapter will take each set of data by area to provide a detailed analysis of the findings from all three schools. This will be followed by the final chapter, Chapter 6, where a discussion of the data findings, with conclusions and implications from the study will be presented.

## CHAPTER 5

### SYNTHESIS AND ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study was to analyze how high school students in one school system interpreted the creation of a racially identifiable school alongside two racially integrated schools. The primary data source for the study was student focus group interviews with students from the system's three high schools. Secondary data sources, used for triangulation purposes, included newspaper reportage, board documents, and field notes from school events or those related to the schools. These sources were analyzed in detail in the previous chapter and a number of patterns were identified in respondent comments.

This chapter will revisit the patterns identified in the student comments about the restructuring process and identify the broader themes that characterize those patterns. The four major areas of data analysis in the previous chapter are treated here individually—school demographics, buildings and other resources, school image, and curricular features. Then the themes identified in each section are synthesized and analyzed to document the sociocultural effects of segregated public schooling, as highlighted through the discussion on Kenneth Clark's work developed in Chapter 2.

What emerges in this analysis is that at almost every level students interpreted the school restructuring process as being motivated by an assumption that West High students were less intelligent, less safe to be around, less prepared and motivated to do school work, less worth a commitment of resources, etc. This assumption was, for students, inextricably tied to the fact

that West High had been constituted as a 100% African-American school in a neighborhood that was historically both African-American and low income. In other words, the marginalization of West High was racialized in their mind. Furthermore, many students saw the elements of a self-fulfilling prophecy in the racial marginalization of West High. Low expectations held by school system officials and community members led to lower student enrollments, which in turn led to narrower curricular options. High achieving students avoided West High or, if assigned there, may attempt to leave West HS. Fewer high achieving students meant less course offerings for such students, which in turn would fuel further avoidance and exodus. There were rumors that some of the best teachers did not want to come to West High. Students were aware of all of this. They expressed fear that West was increasingly seen as less worthy of the system's material investments and of student and teacher personal investments. All of this combined to provide students with a complex social text that told them that West HS students were being set up for failure.

So why are these student interpretations significant? As has been often repeated in these pages, it has not been the point of this study to assess the veracity of these student impressions that West had been intentionally racially marginalized in the system. The point here is to document these student interpretations and examine the interpretations themselves for implications regarding the well being and success of students. This approach is founded on the premise that all student experiences of school—including their interpretation of the policies and practices of educational professionals who are entrusted with their care—are a source of meaning for students and are consequently part of the curriculum they receive from the school. It seems uncontroversial to assert that a school that delivers a dehumanizing message of racist marginalization to a large number of its students is doing something terribly wrong. This chapter

will argue that in fact this is what Rivertown educational policy makers have done. Furthermore, it will offer that other districts and systems enacting similar policies are likely following the same trend of creating neighborhood schools that racially segregate students who formerly attended desegregated schooling contexts. This in turn will be presented as one of many reasons why the current national trend towards increased racial segregation of public schools needs to be halted and reversed.

This approach is not meant to imply that student impressions are the only feature that matters in an institutional process like this, neither is it to even imply that student interpretations of school policy and practices are the most important influential factor determining inequitable educational practices. There can be little doubt that the differences in curriculum, school size, school facilities, and capital donations from parents all had real and negative consequences for student learning independent of students' interpretations of those inequities. And any effort to provide educational justice to Rivertown students would, necessarily, need to address these material imbalances.

Granting the truth of such assertions, however, does not mean that the effects of the restructuring process are limited to the direct consequences of material inequities. Student interpretations of the restructuring often focused on the material dimensions or consequences of the restructuring process. Many of these elements were visible to students, teachers, and others interviewed in the overall study of this school system's restructuring. So, although this study does not make an effort to examine *all* the effects of material differences in school facilities, availability of advanced curriculum, teacher quality, etc., it does look at the some of the effects these differences had on student understanding of their educational experiences.

Within this limited unit of analysis, this chapter does not attempt to parse out which students' interpretations are responses to phenomena that operate in a material modality and which are responses to phenomena operating in a modality of racial signification (Hall, 1996; Rex, 1970). Given the complex feedback loops that appear in students' and teachers' responses to the restructuring over a three-year period, such distinctions seem difficult to make with confidence. Instead, this study is committed to documenting student interpretations to the restructuring process as a complex whole, identifying and dramatizing salient themes in these interpretations, and presenting them as a justification for vigorous response.

### Demographics of the Schools

The first student data section, the demographics of the schools, presented students' responses to how they were divided across the three schools. This included two subtopics: the creation of an all Black school and assessments of the racial demographics of the schools through the lens of their expectations for the pending rezoning. Students from the three schools talked in varying degrees about demographic compositions of the schools. West High students discussed this topic the most often drawing on personal experiences of the multi-year district restructuring that increasingly segregated the West Side Black students. Without knowing how zone lines were designated, students at all of the schools understood that educational leaders were ultimately responsible for them. Because the high schools were patterned after the middle schools, which had been restructured and resegregated earlier, most participants believed leaders had intentionally sought a type of racial separation through the high school restructuring. The building assignment patterns contradicted students' conceptions of equality and consequently, students questioned the moral integrity of leaders for allowing the high school demographics to move in a direction that resembled a Jim Crow legacy. West High students felt this in a

particularly personal way. They not only interpreted the broad patterns of racial segregation in their schools as indicating that they were less respected and less cared for. They also experienced this in their daily lives on and off campus. They reported feeling marked by virtue of attending a school that White students would not, for the most part, attend. The fact that so few White students chose to enroll at West High publicly underlined their subordinate status both as individuals and collectively in relation to peers across the school system.

### *Creating an All Black School*

Students from all three schools consistently referred to the demographic make-up of the schools within the historical context of segregationist practices. Occasionally they mentioned this relation only to reject a connection between the two. More frequently they affirmed the continuity between earlier segregationist policies and the creation of a new all Black school in Rivertown. Students at all three schools observed how the schools were restructured as soon as the desegregation order had been lifted and the law permitted leaders to do this. Students frequently asserted that this desire to undo the desegregation of city schools was not one condoned by the majority of the families in the community, but that it certainly was held by those in positions of influence. At times, students expressed feeling shame that their city had chosen to create a racially segregated school; this seemed especially regrettable given their frequently expressed view that the desegregated system had served students well.

Some students offered more detailed analysis that anticipated negative effects the creation of an all-Black school would have not just on students, but on the community as a whole because they believed school choice operated to a certain degree. The creation of an all Black school would motivate some parents to remove their families from the zone. This would further polarize housing that cemented them into distinct racial sectors across the city. Some thought

that attaining true integration across the community was now hopeless--the restructuring had catapulted this beyond reach. They identified a hierarchy of the schools that defined West High as less, not through any fault of the West High students, but because of its demographic composition and location—it would be the school people avoided. This thought in turn fed a more general kind of fatalism—that it was still impossible to change racist and white supremacist beliefs, even though they disagreed with these and believed they needed to be undone. In other words, the school restructuring—at least for some students—had the effect of coloring their sense of possibility for their lives and the world far beyond their schooling.

General feelings of shame or regret about moving back in the direction of racially segregated public schooling were a common sentiment expressed by participants in this study. Some students, however, had more personal reactions. West High students in particular discussed how the racial division of the schools indicated that some members of the community thought of them as undesirable and unimportant. They cited the pattern of resegregation going back to the restructuring of the middle schools to argue that the racial separation was intentional. Several West High seniors recalled knowing in fifth grade that the change to neighborhood middle schools meant theirs would be all Black. The high school restructuring vote was also vivid in their minds as seventh graders in the all Black middle school because this ended their hope of ever attending an integrated school. These two dramatic changes, along with other aspects of the restructuring, convinced the majority of the student participants at West that leaders used the strategy of gradualism to disarm any argument that the restructuring was racially motivated, thus preventing any outcry against it.

It was the intention they saw in the school policy, the intention to exclude them, to remainder them to a school that offered less chance of success in life that was often the driving



animus of their comments. As was seen in Chapter 4, West students often expressed a belief that school leaders knew what each new school would “have” demographically, making it all the more plausible to them that the restructuring was racially motivated. They believed they had been separated from Whites for two important reasons. First, White parents did not want their children attending school with Blacks, and second, racist leaders (who, they pointed out, were not necessarily parents) wanted to separate the races by removing Black students from certain sections of the city.

Whether this intention actually existed or not is not salient here. What is significant is the fact that many students earnestly believed it was the only explanation for the what happening to their school and themselves. That belief colored their experience of schooling and of the community around them. Directly or inferred, student participants expressed the idea that Black students on the West Side were considered “not good enough” to be with Whites. This was one of the lessons the district restructuring policy was teaching them.

### *Rezoning*

Although the demographics of the schools and the creation of an all-Black school were among the most visible and immediate effects of the school restructuring policy and therefore precipitated the most comments, students also frequently commented at length on a more technical aspect of the policy—the redrawing of school zones. The school system zoning decisions were consistently reported as front page items in the local paper. They were a subject of discussion on local TV news and radio stations, as well as in the teacher lounge and in students’ homes. As documented in Chapter 4, students were reading and listening to these discussions and were making what sense they could of what they saw and heard. West High students, who felt the most negatively impacted by attendance policies, had the most to say about

the way zone lines had been drawn. In fact, the rezoning process was the phenomena most cited to support their claims that the restructuring was racially motivated.

Students often admitted they did not understand the process of forming and approving public school zone lines. Yet, many saw discrepancies between what school district and community leaders were saying about the zones, and what was actually happening in their schools. Students did not believe district officials when they claimed that everything would be equal for the schools, given the eventual racial make-up of the three schools. Leaders most certainly knew it would be all Black from the start, but students continually expressed the belief that because leaders said all three schools would be equal this would have been one of the criteria of equality included with the restructuring. Their incredulity is understandable. It is difficult to see how the creation of a 100% Black school in a racially mixed district could have been an accident, especially, when they noted that Black students from the western side of the city were being bused to integrate the northern schools.

In addition to noting the stark message of inequality sent by the demographic division that came from the original zoning decisions for attaining unitary status, students anticipated and followed the discussions surrounding the second round of rezoning. Again, West High students were the ones to most frequently comment on this. Students at West reported that they heard the other two schools were “too Black” and that rezoning was needed to “correct” this anomaly. This does not appear to be mere youthful excess expressed as suspicion. The Rezoning Committee’s Report (May, 2000) expressed this as an eventual concern—that eventually East High would become more than 70% Black and would begin to experience an exodus of White students, resulting in two nearly all-Black schools in the city and one racially integrated school. As the report put it, “No one wants that,” (p. 26).

This interpretation of the second round of rezoning fit in with the West HS students' understanding that district leaders were intentionally using a strategy of gradualism to return to racially separate schools. Even though the district superintendent and her paid consultant insisted publicly and repeatedly that the next phase of the restructuring was being done in a racially blind manner, students saw something different happening in their schools and neighborhoods. Students in different interview groups correctly listed streets, Section Eight housing, apartment complexes, and projects that fourteen months later actually were rezoned from North HS or East HS back to West HS. They did this before any preliminary report was ever presented to the school board by the demographer. These areas were all Black housing, further confirming for them that the restructuring was premised on a need to remove West Side Black students from the other two schools. Higher income and Whiter housing areas adjacent to West High's zone (from the Southeastern side of their region), they observed, continued to be zoned to East HS or North HS. The West HS students interviewed inferred from this that they were the students with whom White parents did not want their children attending school.

It is important to note that students often expressed reluctance about coming to the conclusion the restructuring was racially motivated. However, the stark facts of the new school demographics, the gerrymandered appearance of the school zones, district leaders' evasions of this topic and tortured justifications of decisions that led to increasing racial segregation, and a local history of racialized and racist politics all presented them with a social text that they felt compelled to read in this way.

#### *Community Discussions on Demographics*

Student conversations about the demographics of the school did not happen in isolation, of course. They were connected to conversations with others about various aspects of the new

school arrangement. At times, it was from adults in the community that students heard predictions about the pending rezoning. For example, one student relayed a conversation his sister had had with co-workers about the problem that East HS was too Black and that Blacks would be removed to recoup the prestige of its namesake. Others read news articles and stated the local leaders' goals of city growth as reason for the restructuring. In other words, these were conversations taking place across the system that students were a part of and drew on to make meaning of the restructuring.

### *School Demographics as a Social Text*

Restructuring a relatively large urban school system, including redrawing new zone lines, building new buildings, and reassigning all teachers to new school sites and new courses is a serious undertaking. It is not, however, necessarily one that would create the impression of severe stratification of educational opportunity between different feeder systems within the school system. The school restructuring in Rivertown did create that impression in the general citizenry and, as this study documents, among the students enrolled in the system.

Differences in school demography are one reason that the three newly created high schools developed such different reputations so quickly. One of the most talked about features of the high school restructuring plan—talked about by students, parents, teachers, administrators, in the papers—was that West High School was nearly 100% African-American. West HS thus became identified as the district's "Black school" even though East HS had a majority of Black students (65+ %) and North HS had become slightly more than half Black the year of interviewing students.

There are other ways West HS could have been identified. It was located in an area of town with the highest concentration of low income households. It therefore could have been

remarked upon as a school serving a low income community. This did happen to some extent. It could have been identified with the “West-Side” neighborhood. To some extent this happened as well—except that the zoning lines did not coincide in any clear fashion with a single neighborhood.

Primarily, however, the schools were read as a racial text and West HS was interpreted as a Black-identified school. As a consequence, the meaning of events at West HS and simply attending it was framed by already existing white supremacist discourses. With minimal reference to empirical evidence, students in the system expressed concern that West HS was unsafe, that student motivation there was lower, or that educational opportunity was less there. Others—most frequently those at West HS—expressed concern that others in the community perceived that West HS fit these descriptions. Either way—whether by internalization of these impressions or through recognition and efforts to resist these representations of West HS—the understanding that West had been marked as an all-Black school and therefore a place with degraded educational opportunities was widespread and profoundly felt.

This impression actually existed as anticipation even before the schools were physically restructured. Newspaper reports revealed that teachers, parents, and students in the early stages of the restructuring expressed concern that a newly restructured school system would move back in the direction of increased racial segregation. They expressed concern that this would happen at the expense of students attending any school that had an over representation of African-American students. Students elected to drop out of the advanced IB curriculum<sup>33</sup> available at West HS because they preferred not to attend the new West HS—something that made the front

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<sup>33</sup> See April Wortham, September 27, 2003, *The Tuscaloosa News*. Of the 41 juniors and sophomores eligible to continue the program, only nine chose to do so. These students all came from the East and North high schools, and had been granted waivers to attend West HS instead of their neighborhood school.

page news. Many expressed doubt that the IB program would even continue, given the unlikelihood that any White students would enroll in the all-Black school. When the restructuring actually happened, many respondents expressed feeling shock that the district had in fact created a 100% African-American schools, whose only non-Black students were students bused in from the other two school zones to take the Pre IB curriculum. It was this racial composition of the school that stood out.

Again and again, students reported that they saw indications either that West was in fact a “problem” school or that it was thought of as such, because of its demographics. This was only reinforced when students began to anticipate the second round of restructuring that was about to unfold. This confirmed what has been widely discussed and suspected, that the racial segregation was intentional, premeditated, and driven by a desire of some parents and community members to create a majority White school.

This interpretation of West High as a racial text was thought by students to have material implications for the educational possibilities available to West Side students. The racial identification of the school, combined with the long history of racial inequality and ubiquitous white supremacist discourses, already served to mark West HS as at risk for marginalization and low performance. This in turn informed educational decisions on the part of parents and administrators that had the effect of contributing to material inequality across the schools. These material differences in turn became another part of the social text that students read that told them West HS was the least desirable of the three high schools. It is to the text of some of those material inequalities that I now turn.

## Buildings and Other Resources

The second area of data analysis was the student discussions about resources, which included the subtopics of the building timeline, the potential for donations by neighborhoods, and enrollment as a resource. Resources affected visible markers of success for the schools, making them a significant lens through which students examined the restructuring. It comes as no surprise that students sometimes judged the progress of the schools to the extent they had successful programs, making enrollment numbers needed for clubs and teams as well as community donations of especial interest. Students found resources in uneven measures across the schools, forcing them to assess the fairness of the restructuring in ways that seemed to surprise them as they spoke. Sometimes they ignored lopsided material advantages, however, and concluded that because West HS did not approach the level of success of the other two schools that it was the problem school that needed to be fixed. West HS students were particularly sensitive to the disparities in resources across the schools and discussed how shortfalls trapped them into a category of less. At times they vowed to try harder, hoping their efforts would change their lower status and attract greater support and enrollment--something they (and their teachers) felt was an overwhelming challenge. Continual promises of equality voiced by leaders in public forums and reiterated in the press did not seem credible. They could not help but interpret the unevenness of these resources as an indication that they were less valued by those who had the means to provide them.

### *Building Timeline*

Part of the meaning the restructuring came through students' interpretation of the building timeline. This started with the degree to which the community supported the change to multiple schools. Some viewed the rapid construction of the new buildings, for example, as

proof to some that the restructuring plan did not have a broad based support. As one student offered in Chapter 2, had construction of the new buildings not immediately commenced after the board approved to split the former West HS, the decision could well have been turned around by the incoming newly elected board. This interpretation reflected the unpopularity of the change that continued in some older students' minds. Assigning West HS students to the fifty year old building while students in the integrated schools enjoyed new facilities served as another lens of interpretation. The topic of West High's new building evoked shame from students across the system at how the West HS students had been treated and relief that it was near completion. Many felt equity would come both symbolically (the students would feel like they were equal) and materially (they would get to do as much as the others) with West High's new building. A regrettable outcome of the building delays was that it surfaced doubt among students and other community members that West High's students would take care of a new building. A few students debated that community members thought a new building for West HS students was a waste of money. They disagreed with this, yet believed West High's geographic proximity to housing projects reinforced such negative impressions about the West HS students. Students, then, sensed that there was a reluctance to invest in the West HS students. This was something the processes of the restructuring were teaching the students.

West HS students were not unaware of this public ascription of less through the building timeline and demographic make-up of the schools. They saw it affect their social relations with peers across the system as students responded to the new structure. A hierarchy of better and less seeped into student relationships through the status offered by a new building as peers attending the new buildings now considered them as lower and avoided them. West HS students said they would not return this treatment when they entered the newest building, highlighting the



extent to which they sensed this rejection through the low status of an old building. Foremost in the West HS students' minds was the anomaly that despite coming from the same former West HS and even retaining its name, they were not treated by school leaders the same as their peers—something they frequently pointed out. They often referenced the building timeline as evidence of this distinction. A few felt it unfair that West's new building had not even been part of the initial plan when the East and North schools were being planned. Some showed resilience to being in the old building by stating that the education *in* the building was more important than a new building, echoing their teachers' efforts to console them. But overall, most students sensed that they were less cared about by leaders who had the power to make decisions about the buildings and had made sure the first two new buildings were complete and ready for students in the eastern and northern zones while the opposite transpired for them.

The walkout the West HS students staged as their frustration grew was an example of collective resistance to the inequality they sensed about their new building. As one student pointed out, they waited for the adults to take on the role of ensuring the process moved forward; when this did not happen, they asked themselves what they could do. Their response to the adults who seemed to belittle them for this effort at civic engagement was the moral need to take this stand. They suffered the negative consequences of the construction lags, which they felt leaders were ignoring. Despite their interest and involvement, this made it seem as though they were insignificant—their needs were not a priority for leaders. As a few older students cogently observed, it had always been this way for the Black community and this case was no different. They would have to fight for their building and struggle to attain an equal share of what their peers had so easily been given. Their attempts to appeal to the adult leaders, unfortunately, led some West HS students to conclude that public forums were just a polite formality that feigned

civic engagement to make things appear equal. As contradictory as the process was for getting their building as opposed to the smooth, efficient process they observed for completing facilities for the integrated schools, they also emphasized that they did not want this to be a racial matter. They found that the building timeline created disparities in the provision of resources distinguished by race that made what they thought should not have been an issue of race become one.

### *Community Funding*

All the schools had to start anew to build up programs, exaggerating financial needs during the initial years of the restructuring. Students generally expressed some frustration with getting donations, noting that one common purse now had to support three schools. Donations were necessary to offer activities that would bring prestige to the school, even attract students. Leaders had argued in favor of the restructuring on this point—community schools nestled in neighborhoods would foster greater monetary support of programs that relied almost entirely upon donations to function. Students did not know this justification, but they did discuss the degree to which communities were able to financially support the extracurricular activities at the schools, pointing out that school location fairly accurately predicted the level of financial support a school could expect. The distinction of being located near housing projects led students to reason that West High was vulnerable to less community support in contrast to schools located in wealthier areas. Some students cited great funding discrepancies between North HS and East HS, supposing an even greater gap existed for West HS, which they felt was unfair. Despite this view, however, several maintained that West HS’s continual fundraisers indicated they were “trying to be equal” with East High and North High, something they said was an unrealistic goal they needed to abandon. If not stated by many, such commentary hinted that the restructuring

was teaching students that West High's place was automatically less and that they expected it most likely would remain so.

West HS students, aware of their lower financial support, tied this to latent white supremacist discourses about them they knew were present in the community. The lack of donations led some to sense doubt across the community that they would take care of things, including a new building. In other words, the lack of funding came with their lower standing—people did not care about them, but perhaps also did not trust them. Insufficient donations very quickly prevented West HS from being a school of choice like the other two schools because it could not offer comparable programs. These understandings placed them in a fatalistic bind—how could they ever convince the community that their school was good and that they were eager to have programs without the visible proofs the community expected with this status of being a good school? Without funding it was difficult to have programs, but without programs, it was impossible to have outcomes worthy of financial support, setting off a circular type of dysfunction that was difficult to turn around. This bled into West HS students' understandings about enrollment; their small size constrained student participation levels, leading students to seek ways to attract students “back” to West HS, further increasing their frustration with funding disparities. At one point, students blamed themselves for their lower student participation in extracurricular activities. Were the lower outcomes in extracurricular activities tied to resources or could it be that they really just did not try as hard as peers attending the other two schools?

An outlier was that some believed high test scores attracted greater resources because school leaders could allocate leftover monies to support programs that had proven successful (something some experienced through the successful magnet program in elementary grades that eventually was terminated). In this interpretation, students felt West's low test scores also

worked against them. In any case, less funding negatively impacted their enrollment in a domino effect. West HS students knew that peers would never be attracted to a place with limited programs. All of this served to reinscribe their lower status as students ensuring that theirs would not be a school of choice.

### *Enrollment as a Resource*

Enrollment was an important lens through which the students assessed the restructured schools, but primarily so for West HS students. Students at all schools talked of the element of choice for school enrollment and knew that parents, to some degree, had options, whether based on the financial resources to move or through other strategies to get a child into a preferred school. They noted that programs, especially athletics, had the power to attract newcomers and cited examples where this had taken place. Students, then, read the text of choice into the interest generated by the new schools—schools many felt had been specifically designed to attract more students into the system. West HS students soon understood the schools were not equal by any means, however. There was not a school people chose or were likely to choose.

Many students were aware of the influx of private and county school students to North HS and East HS, and knew the restructuring had been designed to attract these students. They also believed there was some, albeit limited, freedom of choice to select a school. Wealth obviously allowed families to move. As was often the case, however, students knew that families used influence or fake addresses to circumvent strict zone lines so their children could attend a school out of zone. They provided stories of peers whose parents had found a way to successfully enroll a child in a preferred school. The use of choice, then, reflected to students the desirability of a school, again, placing them along a hierarchy that West HS students could not ignore.

West HS students, sensitive to zone restrictions, interpreted their enrollment size as an effect of school choice. Confounded about how to make their school one to which students would transfer, they took on the burden to work around an unfair structure they had been dealt. Zone lines seemed unfair in that North High “took” students they believed should have been attending West HS, yet rezoning them back contradicted the idea of having integrated schools, so in conflicting ways, inscribed a status of less to their all Black school that would become a bigger all Black school. Still, choice was a significant part of how they thought students would return. With their new building opening in a few months, students discussed the hopes that many students would come “back” to West HS, offsetting the initial exodus to the new buildings. Some had doubts about the effect even a new building could wield, given the demographics of the schools. They knew the attraction of integrated schools worked against their school; they offered that parents would want to send their children to a school that was diverse, not one that was all Black. Several admitted their own families had sought this out over the years—at times successfully. In light of the many disadvantages they faced, some likened enrollment under the restructuring to cherry picking--people would be attracted to a North HS or an East HS, thus selecting out the best students to create two higher performing schools from the former West HS. They knew the integrated schools had received an influx of private school students—something not true for their school, but which spoke to the success of the cherry picking strategy. In their eyes, it worked.

Students were also aware of comparisons of schools through test scores, and some further assessed their enrollment in light of the effects of accountability mandates. The NCLB transfer letters sparked a strong negative reaction by some West HS students, who anticipated public critique of their school. West HS was too small, but it also needed good students, so transferring

to another school would only undermine their chances for success (including meeting AYP goals). West HS students concluded that people would want to see them fail, as the transfer option operated counter intuitively to harm West HS. Their reaction was to stay and work hard to make West HS become a school of choice. Others felt West HS's low enrollment already contributed to its lowered status through accountability measures. All three high schools proceeded from the former West HS, they argued, but the division unfairly made their school statistics worse—there had always been students who did not pass graduation exams, but their small school bore the bulk of this burden for all of the high schools, thus exaggerating this count against them and marking their school with a stigma that would be difficult to change.

#### *Resources as a Social Text*

Community schools had their appeal to stakeholders as debates ensued about splitting the former West HS. News reportage showed that White parents bought into the idea of more opportunities with a multiple schools structure, claiming innocence to the accusation of being racist by upholding this preference. This option meant the creation of an all Black high school, yet people attempted to downplay this reality. They were not racist and this was only a natural outcome of following the middle school split that followed a neighborhood schools model. To appease concerns, leaders frequently insisted the three schools would be equal, even as indicators after the first year of the restructured middle schools suggested otherwise. For example, the initial differences for PTA funds between West MS and each of the other two middle schools was tenfold--a foreboding most chose to ignore even on the cusp of the vote to split the old West high school (Deffendall, 2000b). Fairness under a new interpretation now meant what a community was willing to spend to support its school, notwithstanding economic potential of the

neighborhoods or enrollment sizes. Discretionary resources under this type of structure would never approach equal for the all Black high school.

Fairness, based upon a color blind policy by whatever measure, did not seem to replace the white supremacist ideas that continued to prevail over the all Black West HS regarding resources. Nowhere was this more apparent than with the treatment of the West HS students and their new building. Perhaps the most audacious part of the new policy was to place the all Black school in what had been the original all Black high school under Jim Crow *de jure* and *de facto* segregationist policies prior to a court ordered desegregation plan that was put into place in 1978. This was a fifty-year old building with no on site athletic facilities and severely lacking in technology; the integrated schools were in new buildings with state of the art athletic facilities, updated technology in classrooms, and thousands of dollars of materials through restructuring monies West HS would not receive until three years later. Using six million dollars in funds many believed were earmarked for West HS's new building to finish the other schools' athletic facilities highlighted to the community that White students' needs would be met first, including hoped for students not even in the system. Black students who had been part of the system their entire school trajectory could wait.

The West HS students did not talk about the misallocation of building funds. But they did continually talk about the tradition of Black struggle for a fair share of public goods, reflecting an understanding of leaders' priorities for the system's students. The building timeline, then, became a racial issue as students interpreted it through the local racial history of Jim Crow—allocations of public goods related to schooling had always been this way for Blacks and this case was no different. They knew this from stories of parents and extended family members; they lived it through the reality of the restructuring. Students expressed

disappointment in the building delays, but three years of struggles for material benefits their peers enjoyed while they continued to lack these compounded their status of less made them feel this was how things “always were” for their West HS—last and least. Though nuanced, and perhaps at best my inference, they seemed to equate the circumstances of West MS with West HS, which may have been why only three years into the restructuring they stated that things “always” were this way for West HS. Most senior West participants had attended the all Black middle school, so drew on many years of struggles with resources the other schools seemed to have in great abundance.

West HS students showed resilience--they could reject the idea that they were less because they were assigned to the old building. They could continue their studies because the building should not have mattered. They could stay out of the realm of the lower status war by not returning this treatment to peers when entering their new building in a few months. These were ways in which students attempted to get around the stigma of the building placement. But this did little to change the commentary they heard, the peer reactions to them that signaled they were lower, and the sense that leaders doubted they would take care of a new building.

That the starkness of the facilities gap would be closed was an eventual *fait accompli*. West HS would get its building. Any sense that this actually damaged West HS students’ educational possibilities was countered by leadership with per pupil spending statistics by region, which although race free, suggested that something was wrong with the systems’ all Black schools in the western area. Even as the system’s leaders placed per pupil spending rates out in the public narrative in handouts and power points on the system’s website to indicate the extra resources provided to the western area’s schools, it failed to take into account the resources essential for the success of a comprehensive school. In other words, a dollar breakdown, as



shown in Table 1 in Chapter 2, would stave off any cries of unfairness on the part of the system, deflecting protest over other disparities. The message in community presentations, forums, and in the local newspaper was that despite much investment—more per pupil spending than the larger integrated schools--the all Black schools just did not seem to respond well. In some ways, this allowed the system to wash its hands of responsibility for West HS's struggles. Teachers and students knew otherwise. The students saw discrepancies operating as lacks in resources crucial to the success of a secondary school weighed heavily against West HS.

Contrasts in programs between the two larger schools and West HS could have been predicted and their reality should have prompted attention. Instead, the narrative became one of blame—by default, the West HS community was not supporting their school and children. West HS could have been seen in light of its many lacks in resources crucial to the functioning of a secondary comprehensive school. An absence of this type of scrutiny only served to further mark the school as less, as one that students might not choose to attend, further exacerbating the dilemmas of an extra small enrollment. This was what West HS students sensed had them trapped and had the effect of marking theirs as the bad school and them as the bad students.

The degree to which private donations accrued symbolized that the restructuring worked—for two of the schools. But this only served to confirm the latent discourses about the West HS students and their families. By year three, students felt it unreasonable for West HS students to think they could be like East HS and North HS. Accusations of trying to be the same spurred the reaction, “and they can't.” West HS's struggles would permanently mark it as less across the community. It could not be what the integrated schools were.

Enrollment was a significant indicator for community and school leaders, who often applauded the restructuring as successful on this count. News reporters from the local

newspaper paid close attention to enrollment figures for the city schools, marking increases as proof that the restructuring had worked. This measure of success would only be true for two of the high schools, however. West HS's enrollment declined or remained lower than its first year enrollment even as the other two schools grew to nearly twice the size of West HS, limited only by their small building design that capped at 1200. With West HS's extra small enrollment, a host of programs were negatively affected, yet this resulting absence of programs and recognitions only confirmed for peers that West HS was, after all, the problem school.

The West HS students knew their school was seen as inferior and sought ways to change this, but saw their lower status solidify as pathways to resources met with dead ends. Resource lacks contributed to West HS's lower enrollment, which sabotaged programs. Boycotting the choice to transfer out of West HS through NCLB was one dramatic way students attempted to not just support, but actually help their school, illustrating the degree of personal responsibility and emotional and psychological burdens the West HS students took on to correct the consequences of the inequities they faced. In this way, students not only showed resilience in the face of unequal resources—they resisted what those discrepancies would do to their school.

Participants knew that lacks in resources created the conditions that maintained a lower status for West HS, leaving West HS students to sense some degree of abandonment by school leaders and community members. However, West HS students interpreted the building delays as indicative of having a lower status symbolically prior to any division of material resources. The middle school split suggested that they were not wanted in the schools; the high school split and talk of further rezoning confirmed it. They were not the same as their peers, and had been treated differently even from the planning stages of the restructuring of the high schools. They likewise saw that lacks of a new building and limited donations kept their enrollment at a

dysfunctional level, leading them to take on the burden of changing their lower status to correct this downturn. But personal encounters with people in the community pointed to reasons for their lower enrollment other than just problems with programs and lack of a new building. West HS students had suspicions as to why their school remained so small, and scrutinized what it was that prevented them from being a school of choice by offering a complex reading of the social text the restructuring created, which the next data section on school image addressed.

### School Image: Safety, Discipline, and Media Bias

This area of the data examined the students' ideas about the images of the schools and included subtopics of safety, discipline, and media bias. Students from all three schools offered extensive commentary on safety and fighting at the schools, though several serious negative incidents that had taken place at the two integrated schools garnered most attention. They also talked about fighting and to some extent, media portrayals of the schools. Student impressions of the schools ran along a hierarchy of good or bad and dangerous or safe that did not line up with the contradictory evidence of these anecdotes, however. At least some students found that a school's having or not having serious negative events did not necessarily coincide with its image. School image was a particularly significant lens through which the West HS students examined the restructuring, as this served to explain why their school never became a school of choice like the other two. They directly refuted the many white supremacist discourses they sensed were prevalent about them or their school—ones they believed ultimately undermined the success of their school.

#### *Safety*

Students talked about safety in reference to two types of dangers at the schools, which selectively bled into the schools' images. The first type included any serious infraction taking

place at a school. Nearly all interview groups referred to the North HS stabbing, though many remarked on serious events that had occurred at East HS as well. A second type of danger had to do with threatening surroundings of a school's location. Students expressed fears only about West HS, which continued to occupy the old West HS western campus. This distinction was not due to any dangerous incidents that had occurred there since the restructuring but because students held negative associations about its geographic location on the West Side—a place considered by many to be the dangerous part of the city. Unfortunately, by association, this generated negative assumptions the West HS students detected about themselves that came up in participants' responses, not just from the West HS students' peers, but from community members as well.

Bad events at North HS and East HS were common knowledge that evoked much student commentary. Students never expressed any feelings of fear or concern about safety at their own schools, though some expressed surprise that North HS was still considered a safe school after the stabbing and several other unreported incidents they knew about. Reluctantly, students recognized that only West HS had not ever had “anything bad” happen, though some felt the walkout could be considered on par with the other serious events. The majority felt West HS was automatically considered bad, not from any bad events students could list—they usually could not, but because of its location along with the population it served. Students at the integrated schools expressed great surprise that nothing bad had occurred at West HS, a fact that generated much commentary in light of the North HS stabbing. They admitted the general belief that West HS would have been the first school to have a serious bad event take place. That nothing bad had yet happened was something they still felt was unusual three years into the restructured high schools.

West HS students likewise talked quite a bit about the dangerous events at the other two schools, but usually posed these in defense of their school. They offered stories of community members confronting them with the belief that theirs was the dangerous school leading them to list incidents to prove this idea false--bad things had occurred at the other two schools, but not at theirs. Offering this evidence seemed to do little to change people's views of them or their school over time, however, confirming for them that people saw them as the stereotypical bad Black kids or the bad West Side kids—phrases they often used to explain the reactions that theirs was the bad school. They knew people thought they were dangerous and believed this perception was what prevented people from enrolling at their school, especially White students. This explained why the schools where serious events occurred continued to be schools of choice while theirs was the one everyone avoided—something to which their racial demographic and proportionately lower enrollment bore witness. They knew unjust assumptions were made about their school and continued to proliferate because it was all Black and located near housing projects or on the West Side, ideas that data from students and teachers across the schools corroborated.

### *Discipline*

The subtopic of discipline referred to the presence of fighting inside the schools along with the degree to which this characterized the reputation of a school. A common idea students had was that families, especially private school clientele, would avoid a school where fighting was present. A few understood that the restructuring had been designed specifically to solve this problem with the old West High. Yet, according to them, dividing the big West HS into three schools had not necessarily undone this problem for the schools. Students, in fact, expressed shock at the events and fighting, which for some seemed to have increased in the new integrated

schools. As with the subtheme of safety, no students ever expressed feeling fear at their own school, even with the presence of fighting.

One phenomenon that some students noted was that both East HS and North HS had bad things happen that tended to remain hidden from community members. East HS students were surprised, believing that North HS was supposed to be the good school. In a strange twist, they felt there was parity across the good schools concerning discipline problems. Having nothing bad to report about West HS, students believed that West HS was “already bad” because of its alleged frequent fights, as indicated in Chapter 4. Others disagreed, arguing that no one wanted to give West HS students a chance, and that stereotypes fed unfounded rumors and fears about West HS.

West HS students brought up the topic of fighting far more often than their peers, stating that this was the stereotype the community had of them. They heard their school labeled as ghetto--a term they interpreted primarily to mean fighting—indicating a widespread belief that theirs was a fighting school. West HS students noted that adults and peers they met reacted with surprise when they found out they attended West HS, giving them the impression that the bad Black kids and ghetto kids discourses ran rampant throughout the community. West HS students responded by using themselves as examples of what their school was like, yet this seemed to do little to change people’s minds. They faced frequent reminders of this in the community as the adults with whom they conversed stated outright that they would not send their children to West HS because of its purported fights. There was great frustration that this was the image perpetuated about their school. It marked the school as inherently bad because it was occupied by the stereotypic bad Black kids, something they had become by being separated from peers into an all Black school located on the West Side.

An outlier was that some older White students recalled that students in the former West HS often joked amongst themselves about attending a ghetto school. It was laughable, even daring for academically oriented privileged White students to attend what appeared to be a ghetto school. Its high academic success at the state and national level competitions meant it was by no means a “ghetto” school. This vastly differed from the label of ghetto the West HS students now experienced in the resegregated context.

### *Media Image*

Media image was almost absent from discussions by North HS and East HS students beyond their surprise at unreported safety and discipline events or commentary that West HS students complained about biases in the internal WEN school television production. They never discussed how their schools were portrayed in events nor did they mention any media omissions of school and individual student accomplishments. Neither did they complain about media coverage of serious incidents, though some believed East HS and North HS enjoyed a type of immunity from bad press. They thought this was done intentionally by leaders to maintain an acceptable image before the public, something a few thought was a rather generous break. This would vastly differ for West HS students.

West HS students pointedly discussed media bias they felt damaged West HS’s image in three significant ways. First, they believed that news coverage of serious negative events continually highlighted anything bad about the West Side and their school, while bad events at the other schools were toned down or absent from the news. Second, they found that the integrated schools enjoyed frequent favorable reportage of athletic and other events common to the schools and honors, while less to nothing was published about West HS. Finally, they felt

the internal televised school program WEN followed suit in this bias and either downplayed or did not report West HS's accomplishments, particularly events common to all three schools.

West HS students, then, saw great discrepancies in media reportage, not just for negative incidents but also for recognitions. They thought bad events about the West Side schools were continually placed in the news intentionally to make their school look bad, but also stated their belief that this served the purposes of leaders—this made the other two schools look good (or at least better than West HS). Students complained that downplaying or not reporting serious negative events at East HS and North HS further highlighted West High's bad image to the community. Networks of extended family, neighbors, and friends across the schools informed students of daily events at the schools, whether they made the headlines or not, proving to them the presence of a protective media bias. Lacks in reportage of recognitions as compared to the other two schools was further proof that people were out to mark West HS as less. The media bias—both positive and negative—weighed on students as they pointed to numerous ways they felt their school was unfairly portrayed, reinforcing its image as the dangerous school serving bad Black kids.

Students, then, believed each school's image came primarily from the population it served and the geographic location of the school. Race was interwoven into their interpretations as the West HS students struggled with evidence that pointed to a communitywide belief that the West Side students were dangerous and bad. People would automatically consider the all Black school as bad and they would automatically be the bad Black kids. This created heavy psychological and emotional burdens in many participants as they continually took it upon themselves to demonstrate to peers and other community members in personal encounters that such beliefs were unfounded.



### *Image as a Social Text*

The restructuring of the high schools was applauded by many leaders across the city as a solid program, something reiterated in local news reportage, especially after winning two awards in 2002 for the cooperation of the school system with the city council to fund the restructuring (Kampis, 2002c). The local newspaper reported the Magna Awards the school system received for two years in a row from the American School Board Journal for creating neighborhood schools and for the city council's financing of the restructuring to support a neighborhood schools concept:

The national award actually is a double endorsement of the soundness of the city school board's plan. The city schools won the same honor last year for the board's efforts in persuading the City Council to help fund the restructuring. None of the debate generated by the specific aspects of the plan, including the one in progress over relocating the 15th Street high school, can detract from the basic soundness of the concept. (*The Tuscaloosa News*, 2003, March 26)

Such commentary came alongside growing concern that surfaced months later in news reportage about the fact that one school would be predominately Black because of its location while the other two would be racially balanced. From the start, then, the images of the schools were read as a racial text that was intertwined with region because of building locations and attendance lines.

Some school leaders insisted that they would carefully monitor the progress of the third (all Black) school<sup>34</sup> to ensure that students would have excellent educational opportunities,

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<sup>34</sup> See the July 6, 2003, *The Tuscaloosa News* article by April Wortham. Prior to the opening of the restructured schools there was still public concern that the all Black school would be shortchanged in academic programs.

illustrating the continued concern among community members for the racially identifiable school that did not seem to diminish with time. In other words, people seemed to hold expectations about the third school before the former West HS actually split, and every suspicion continued that it would somehow be less and that those students would be shortchanged. Part of this came with the identifier of being all Black, but part—something that often came up in news reportage and leadership statements—was that the school was located in the predominately Black part of the city where students were already racially isolated.

One and a half years before the schools even opened the city's leaders took on a particular role of influence, reflecting the white supremacist ideology underpinning leadership decisions that ran rampant with the restructuring. Nowhere was this more apparent than through the financial agreement the city council forged for the school system's leaders. The system needed 65 million dollars to refinance what would become an \$81 million building endeavor, and the city was willing to help with \$42 million of that bill. At this point, concern arose among city leaders as to the status of the third school because it was not yet "defined"—at least not to their exigencies. As completion of the northern and eastern buildings drew near, board members discussed the possibility of assigning all the students to the two new buildings and creating an academy or magnet school out of the third building located in the all Black area to which all students could apply. This, it was argued, might get around the predicament of creating an all Black school—something that would happen with the third school's location in the Black area without any intervention. It was clear that people continued to see problems with creating an all Black school in an all Black neighborhood, and that some even attempted to get around this. It was this idea that triggered a response from city councilmen. They needed for the neighborhood

schools to fix attendance in the strictest sense, and it was this intervention that set the social text for the image of the all Black school.

The two integrated schools were safely nestled in predominately White neighborhoods. But city council members expressed distrust at the fate of the third school, located in the predominately Black area of town because it did not yet have definitive boundaries. An open choice magnet or academy program would break any set boundaries typically established by location for a neighborhood school. This prompted the city council to place conditions upon the financial help it offered school leaders by closing this possibility for the school located in the predominately Black area, as reported in the local newspaper,

Council members who added the restrictions said the intent was to ensure a neighborhood school concept is honored. "We felt like that's what the community wanted and we don't want someone to come around and change it," said City Council President [Name].

(Kampis, 2002a)

Using the argument of upholding neighborhood schools, the city council modified a significant condition for providing the additional money to the school system, reported the following day:

The original version of the new agreement allowed for the construction of three comprehensive high schools, but forbade the board from running any of them as an academy or magnet school. The agreement agreed upon Thursday allows for a magnet or academy program at any of the high schools as long as the school is not solely used as a magnet or academy school. Board attorney [Name] said the council was concerned that West HS High would not have a defined zone and would therefore leave itself open to becoming a magnet school, rather than a neighborhood school. The pact does not prevent

the board from offering additional programs like the [technology center] or the International Baccalaureate program at any of the schools. The board plans to keep the IB program at West HS and add a wing to house [technology center]. The restrictive language was not part of the original agreement between the board and council signed in 2001. The mention of an academy or magnet school was added after the board informally discussed the idea of making West HS an academy school with open enrollment, and zoning all city students to the other two high schools. (Kampis, 2002b)

It was the discourse of neighborhood schools by leaders, then, that was used to ensure that the schools functioned as stand-alone comprehensive schools with their own specific attendance regions. The all Black school had to be this, and in the legal provision, would have to remain so by its circumscribed location.

These leaders created boundaries in a way that would ensure that West HS remained within the status of less based upon its location (and its most likely demographic composition)—a policy the students would not have known, but something that in practice they experienced and read as part of the social text. An all Black school and a school located on the West Side would always be considered as the undesirable school alongside the integrated schools. This image grew into the bad and dangerous students and school, as the West HS students read it. As the students often pointed out, everyone knew all Black had to be bad and wild. A school on the West Side serving the West Side Black kids had to be bad—this was the bad area of the city. How could it be otherwise? Students not attending West HS often followed this logic as well, either agreeing with it or able to articulate it even if they disagreed. The absence of bad incidents at West High that had taken place at the other two schools seemed to do little to convince community members that they were anything other than bad Black kids and that theirs

was the bad school because it was located near housing projects. The racial text, then, continued to be a focal point of difference and something that drove its status of less as students read the social text of the restructuring.

The data in this section provided compelling evidence that many West HS students, in scrutinizing the social text of school image, concluded that unfounded assumptions about Black adolescents or all Black neighborhoods rather than overt actions ascribed an inferior status to their school. West HS student interactions with adults in the community reflected both resistance and resilience as they took it upon themselves to correct perceptions of danger and bad Black kids that seemed to automatically come with West HS's location and student population. For the purposes of the images of the schools, the city councilmen's requirement that the new high schools adhere to the structure of neighborhood schools cast the lot for each school's image and with these, the concomitant types of educational opportunity for the schools, as will be seen in the final data section.

Many West HS students believed this lower status affected their school enrollment size, but went further in their analysis. They had clear ideas of how this negatively affected their curriculum, further re-inscribing their lower status in ways they could not correct. The "bad Black kids" and "bad West Side kids" image inscribed upon their school—regardless of what defense they posed to counteract this—prevented them from becoming a school of choice like the other two. Caught in a downward curricular trend, they faced the insurmountable task to turn this chain of events around. But it also denied them access to important educational and socio cultural experiences they felt were necessary to successfully encounter the world beyond graduation, which leads to the area covered in the last data section, the curriculum at the restructured schools.

## Curricular Features

The data area of curricular features under the restructured schools included four subtopics: athletics, curricular opportunities, the IB program, and the hidden curriculum of diversity. Students from all the schools noted some limitations with the smaller schools, though this was intensified for West HS students, who witnessed significant changes in access to curriculum as a result of the restructuring. More importantly, their analyses of how and why such differences took place continually pointed to a stratification of students and schools across the system. In the students' eyes, they were by no means equal. But differences often aligned with the racial text the students read through the restructured schools. Symbolic differences transformed into material inequities that cut off opportunities for the West HS students—ones that re-inscribed the West HS students as less capable, less motivated, less diligent in academics, and generally the students who did not really care about school. This was something many community members suspected would happen before the all Black school was created; in self-fulfilling like prophecy, the structure of the schools actually ensured that this happened symbolically and materially.

### *Athletics*

Greater opportunity for participation in athletics was an advantage to the restructuring, but for most students, the only one. Students from all schools recognized that a benefit of having three schools meant more students had opportunities to make teams or play more. Many agreed, however, that selectivity remained as athletes often followed coaches and fellow team members, concentrating talent unevenly across the schools. Still, they tended to compare their teams against the standard of the former West HS as the measure of success for teams. Although this was the ideal, West HS students often compared their team sizes with East HS and North HS's,

noting the athletic disadvantages they faced with their much smaller teams. Athletics, then, further confirmed the idea of school choice for students, while indicating status for the schools along a hierarchy of better and less.

East HS and North HS's placement into a different athletic ranking from West HS immediately formalized a two-way rivalry between them that grew over time. Discussion about this two-way rivalry led students to sense that West HS became the forgotten school—a realization that evoked feelings of shame and guilt. To ease this uncomfortable feeling, students admitted wanting their peers at West HS to win (or at least not lose so badly) and do well when they played against teams other than those of their own school. Some students explained this sense of exclusion towards West HS by stating that aside from basketball, West HS did not seem to have much in the way of successful sports programs—actually none that they could think of. For them, West HS had the weakest teams, but also was not really relevant to their rivalry because of state classifications. Certain sports stereotyped as choices for wealthier, usually White students (especially golf and tennis) led students to suppose that entire teams were absent from the all Black West HS. But these types of observations supported their assumptions of a lack of interest or effort on the part of West HS students, which seemed to fit their stereotyped understandings of West HS. In this way, West HS became framed out of discussions as the formal division of teams along with West HS's comparative lags in team building naturalized the students' setting West High aside.

Despite many setbacks and barriers, West HS students believed the success of their basketball team, which made it to the state championships—was confirmation that they could aspire to the athletic level of the former West HS and that they would recoup this status with their new building when more students returned. But, while they upheld the standard of the old

West HS like their peers at the other schools did, they actually marked their athletic progress against East HS and North HS. They frequently compared team sizes, noting the devastating effects their smaller teams had on competition. Even the West HS students themselves debated whether their problems with extracurricular activities, including sports, were due to a lack of interest from their student body or other factors. Unlike their peers at the other two schools, they often listed hindrances related to lacks with equipment, fields, coaches, team size, as well as vestiges of White sports from the old West HS that required them to start from zero. All of this affected outcomes that seemed to automatically ascribe a status of less to West HS. Other visible markers of lower status came with things as simple as new uniforms and spirit packs the other schools had that they did not, athletic ability aside. Another significant aspect of difference was the status that Black athletes from the West Side enjoyed. At least some West HS students believed good athletes had been encouraged to attend the White schools—Black talent would be accepted at the integrated schools if it could benefit those schools athletically. A student-generated discourse West HS students revealed from their middle school years was that those who remained on the West Side were the garbage people, reflecting a deep-seated understanding from the youngest participants of their lower status in relation to peers at the other schools. Good athletes were the only West Side students who would be welcomed at the White schools.

#### *Curricular Opportunity*

Participants from all three schools often cited difficulties with access to curriculum easily predictable with smaller high schools. Many mentioned scheduling difficulties, courses that did not make, and overcrowded classes, which they often attributed to smaller school enrollments and faculties. Students frequently mentioned more specific lacks, such as that of textbooks, as they felt these affected the quality of their learning or passing the graduation exam. They



explained these lacks and difficulties in differing ways, however. Importantly, West HS participants also talked about numerous barriers in access to curriculum they knew was available at the other two schools. This reflected to them a sense of abandonment by leaders, but also reinforced the idea that resources followed the White students.

Although many students complained of not enough textbooks, West HS students believed they would not have this lack if Whites attended their school and were convinced that the other schools had sufficient textbooks (one student called a peer to verify this). They expressed the belief that people wanted to see them (or their school) fail. West HS students observed that their class sizes were smaller than those at the other schools, a provision that was made during the initial years of the restructuring. Low enrollment numbers in advanced level courses at times undid this benefit by overcrowding regular courses, however. West HS students felt they lost academic rigor in advanced level courses as a result of combined level classes. This also happened with scheduling conflicts when students took advanced math courses without prerequisite courses, requiring the class to go at a slower pace. Scheduling conflicts led to students losing an advanced diploma, which they believed special transfer arrangements to another school could have salvaged. They observed that students from the other schools received an “easy yes” to attend West HS for the Pre IB but West HS students would not be welcome at the integrated schools—not even to keep a college track diploma. Finally, students observed that special opportunities, such as co-op internships with businesses or government agencies in the community, were lost to the other schools because of scheduling constraints, again, an outcome they attributed to an overly small enrollment and faculty. As opportunities earmarked for their school shifted to another school, they sensed great unfairness in that what little they had was lost to schools that already had so much more. To them, as one student put it,

this was “the story of West HS.” Not only did they always seem to lose out—peers at the well supported schools benefitted from their losses.

### *The IB Program*

Most of the data on the IB program came from students in the Pre-IB classes (that year only students from West HS and North HS participated) and West HS students who either were IB students, were in the combined level courses (IB, AP, and Advanced students), or were aware of the program. Few others seemed to know much about the IB other than it was only offered at West HS and limited their remarks to the belief that, like any other curricular option, it should be offered at all three schools to allow equal access. Students generally held such egalitarian ideals in their assessments of resources and opportunities.

Great conflict arose over the location of the IB, however, and this surfaced commentary that might never have been made about the schools, especially the all Black West HS. North HS Pre IB students were adamant that the IB was wasted at West HS because of little interest and because West HS students were unlikely candidates for this program. To justify switching it to North HS they stated that many of their North HS peers had not taken Pre-IB classes because they were offered at West HS. As one student offered, “at least ninety” of his peers would have taken the IB, had it not been located at West HS. They likewise knew of peers, including themselves, who would not enroll in the IB if it continued at West HS even though they believed it was far better than AP courses. They would never transfer to West HS.

Alongside mounting evidence of failure in participation rates because of its location, the students admitted that many had been confused about the program, suspecting there were intentional efforts to undermine the program for unknown reasons. Part of this was their recall that teachers and guidance counselors from their middle and high schools had overtly

discouraged them from registering for Pre-IB classes. They provided names of people and recalled the circumstances when and where this occurred, indicating this took place over several years' time. More recent administrative errors with scheduling, transportation, and resources, they were certain had also damaged the IB program, though this was their speculation. Still, despite evidence of internal program conflicts they continued to place the primary blame for its failure on its location at West HS. No one wanted to transfer to the all Black school. These students compared the extracurricular activities between North HS and West HS in detail as further proof, starting with athletic teams for both genders but moving into prospering clubs and electives at North HS that they noted were absent or barely existed at West HS—activities they would not give up. As one student finally offered in Chapter 4, “It seems that West HS doesn’t have nice clubs.”

West HS students noticed the lack of participation in the IB, especially by White students from the other two schools. A moderate influx of students to take Pre IB classes in fall 2005 indicated obvious interest, though they saw that enrollment for the IB program—something that required transferring to their school, did not take place. West HS students argued that White parents always chose the top curriculum for their children, so this was an anomaly that suggested families were avoiding West HS. Still, this curriculum also gave them a lens through which to assess the meaning of the creation of an all Black school. Students noted that any outsider visiting the city would never guess that the IB was located at their school. The expectation would be to find it housed at North HS. For some strange reason the IB continued at their school, though some West students believed parents were trying to remove it and place it elsewhere. Students even supposed that the only way White students would ever attend West HS was through the IB, indicating their expected reactions to an all Black school. The IB offered

prestige, yet this surfaced conflict by how the community responded to it. The social text of an all Black school in the predominately all Black section of the city was one they were adept at reading. Though they knew they were not less, such responses indicated that they expected this would always be the way people would treat them.

Perhaps one of the most profound analyses West HS students made about how leaders viewed them came as students shared their experiences of middle school recruitment for the Pre IB courses. These participants, who represented all three middle schools, provided great contrasts in how they had been recruited. Students recruited at North MS and East MS recalled being greatly encouraged to take the IB, with recruiters listing its numerous scholastic benefits, especially preparation for college. Unlike their peers, students recruited at West MS recalled being discouraged from attempting the Pre IB, with warnings that it was difficult—probably too difficult for them. Those students had to go to guidance counselors to insist they were interested in the Pre IB, noting they would never have otherwise been admitted. But as they looked around the room, this explained why so few of those from the West feeder middle school actually entered the program. This social text led them to believe that school leaders held vastly differing expectations for students based upon the school they attended, proving that a hierarchy of better and less existed across the schools. The all Black schools, attended by students from the West Side, were clearly less.

### *The Hidden Curriculum of Diversity*

Students across the schools talked about the value of attending school with a diverse group of students, whether it meant from another area of the city or differences in race, language, or socioeconomic status. Many students noted the loss of diversity with the restructuring, and even expressed concern for students who now remained within a narrow group of peers due to

the feeder school regions. Students who experienced the level of diversity offered by the former West HS their ninth grade year continued to believe that exposure to many different peers was the ideal—one that greatly enriched students’ social and educational experiences. High school now differed little from middle school as the feeder school system meant the same students attended both levels. This greatly contrasted the white supremacist discourse prevalent in news reportage and among community members about diversity. The two integrated schools were applauded as “more racially diverse” than the former West HS because percentages of White students at those schools were higher than the old West HS had been during its last year. Students believed that attending school with only the same one third of the students in the city for one’s entire secondary trajectory (grades six through twelve) was very limiting—in direct contrast to attending the former West HS with its higher percentage of Black students. In other words, the discourses that justified the resegregation claimed greater diversity based upon color of skin percentages, which the students’ understandings strongly refuted. Their conception of diversity was far more robust in that it included attending school with peers from neighborhoods with which they were unfamiliar and differing socioeconomic groups with which they might not otherwise come into contact.

West HS students extended these observations. If students lamented the loss of diversity with the dismantling of the former West HS, they felt this impact in even greater measure. Not only were they exclusively with Black students for their entire schooling, they remained with the same peers from third grade until high school graduation because only one elementary school fed their middle school. Most were adamant that this lack of diversity disadvantaged them because of how it was intricately tied to learning opportunities. With little to no exposure to Whites or other ethnicities educationally and socially, they insisted they were less prepared than their peers

for post-secondary trajectories of work or higher education. At times, just simple skills of interaction with non-Blacks evoked concern. More complex understandings of the ways racial isolation created significant gaps in intellectual preparation because of how dominant ideologies were reflected in classroom interactions with mixed social groups were equally strong concerns. Though they did not disparage being in all Black contexts, this schooling replicated their social sphere and limited the extent to which they would be exposed to other cultural and social perspectives, something at least one student argued had a stultifying effect on classroom discussions, even in advanced level courses. In an extended soliloquy, she addressed the heart of this dilemma—the problem was not “all Black.” That, she felt, was racist, as there was nothing wrong with going home to her all Black family or interacting with others in an all Black community. The problem was the loss of valuable learning opportunities (and all that this implied socially and educationally) because there were “no Whites.”

West HS students felt the Black students were being used to attain diversity in the White schools through the system’s one-way busing.<sup>35</sup> West Side Black students were bused to the White schools in the northern sector, ensuring diversity for those schools, but no Whites were bused to West HS (save a few who came for Pre IB classes for two classes a day), leaving them with no diversity. This gave them the sense that they were less important because diversity was generally espoused as important in today’s global economy. They also noticed that being in the all Black school marked them and their school as different—a difference that translated into different treatment by others. Students described spectacle-like reactions to them as they

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<sup>35</sup> Although stakeholders were reassured by the school system’s lawyer that the burden of busing was evenly distributed, no White students actually were ever bused to any West Side schools. West HS students continually wondered how this one way busing could be considered fair. Students from the West Side were bused to northern schools, which were the whitest in the system, but with the exception of the change in Pre IB options, no White students bused to the West Side all Black schools during the four years we conducted our data collection.

represented West HS and the West Side in events or courses common to the three schools. They felt stared at, not accepted, looked down upon, or looked upon as not belonging in these settings. Students sensed that not having White students at their school was a stark difference that automatically marked their school as less along a hierarchy and marked them as different—a marking that always seemed to stand out. Students from the all Black school would always be distinct from students at the integrated schools and treated as such.

### *Curricular Features as a Social Text*

Differences in curricular opportunities across the schools became a West HS feature under the restructuring and students from all the schools noticed and commented on these to varying degrees. Athletics was one such difference. State classifications exaggerated differences across the schools making it easy for rivalry to grow between North HS and East HS. Enrollment had been apportioned by the school system, so this was not entirely reflective of the schools, but more an outcome of policy decisions about attendance lines. Nevertheless, this formal erasure of West HS as a competitor was something students often read as reflective of effort or of families that did not care about education. Ultimately, West HS was framed out by both teachers and students through the athletic rankings. The realization that West HS had become the forgotten, even abandoned school, elicited feelings of guilt and a sense of “poor West HS.” Students were at a loss to explain this other than West HS was so distinct from North HS and East HS that it just did not fit in. To their knowledge, it did not seem to “have much” in the way of programs except maybe basketball. And though the rankings should have triggered the realization that there were vast enrollment distinctions that affected athletic programs it was easier for students to automatically ascribe a status of less to West HS and its students based upon a lack of effort.

West HS students witnessed many lacks in material resources necessary for athletic success—at least for attaining visible markers of progress. Despite facing incredible material barriers, however, they wondered whether their difficulties stemmed from problems of a lack of interest within their student body. Great differences in team sizes helped explain their struggles with competition. But this only highlighted their need to attract students back to their school. They were also aware of being seen as less because they lacked new uniforms or spirit packs the other schools had. This they read as a lack of community support—something prevalent at the integrated schools but not at their school.

A profound way in which West HS students read the social text through athletics was the idea that the good Black talent had been taken from the West Side. One meaning of this was that good West Side Black athletes would be accepted at the integrated schools but not the other students, who were considered “garbage people.” The social text the students read here was one that ran along the lines of race primarily. There was a hierarchy of students in the system and the West Side students were the ones who were less.

Students sensed that East HS and North HS were alike in other ways, encouraging affinity, but again, separating them as distinct from West HS. Some felt the two schools were academically similar while marking West HS as the “problem school,” especially because it served students on the West Side who lived near housing projects. Although they avoided racial descriptors, they supposed the West HS students would be problem students because of where they lived. This bled into West Side students’ sense of not belonging at North HS. Some went and returned to West HS, others were zoned, but requested from their parents that they return to West HS when its building was completed. Most students were reluctant to elaborate on this, but



teachers commented to me that they knew of students who came back to West HS because they were seen as the stereotypical West Side bad Black kids who were not accepted at North HS.

West HS students were sensitive already to the marker of an all Black school. They attributed the racial division to the white supremacist idea that White parents thought that attending class with Blacks it would hold them back. Students articulated this as they analyzed the creation of an all Black school. For them, academic success was a primary reason for White parents avoiding sending their children to school with Black children. But West HS students' encounters with barriers to educational opportunities also led them to believe that people wanted West HS to fail. Others felt their lack of material resources was tied to being Black—White people wanted the Black students to fail. Obvious losses, such as the co-op internships, brought with them the painful realization that they could not hold on to programs; these would be given to the other schools. This was beyond their control, but this always seemed to happen to West HS.

Of special interest to students was the IB program. West HS students were proud that they had the IB program, but through it they read the social text of race and expectations about Black academic achievement—outsiders would never believe the IB was at their school rather than North HS. A high track curriculum would not be found in an urban all Black high school located in the predominately Black part of the city. In other words, they knew what their school signified despite the rhetoric of equality espoused by school leaders.

Housing the IB at West HS surfaced commentary that revealed white supremacist discourses about West HS prevalent across the community—students and parents believed an IB program would flourish at North HS not at West HS. Despite being the preferred curriculum, highly successful students at the integrated schools would never enroll in West HS to take it—

neither the Pre IB students nor the peers they knew who expressed interest in it would pursue the IB as long as it remained at West HS.

The IB was a special case in that most if not all of the West HS participants believed they had been assigned the best teachers in the system, often listing the quality of the IB teachers' instruction and care as evidence of this advantage. These insinuations were often made by students to counter the idea that academic standards at West HS were somehow less—something they seemed to suspect people thought about their school. Some students believed that only because of the IB would West HS be able to attract White students, though when this did not take place students believed White parents did not want to enroll their children at West HS. A curriculum they felt should have attracted White students to their school did not. At least some seniors realized there were far different expectations for students from the West Side as a result of the Pre IB recruitment experiences they shared. These dynamics about the IB taught the West HS students that an all Black school was the primary descriptor of their school, that people still expected that it was less, and that people would avoid it. Even offering an advanced level curriculum would not likely attract a diverse group of students to their school. The racial marker of their school would be its prevailing descriptor and prevent it from being anything other than this.

Finally, many West HS students expressed great concern for what the lack of diversity in their educational trajectory meant for them after high school. They believed they were greatly disadvantaged because diversity was crucial to preparation for mainstream society, including post-secondary education. Students at all the schools said they now had much less diversity, though contrary to arguments by those who saw racial proportions as a more accurate indicator, students felt attending school with the same group from middle school on was far more

constraining than their new racial proportions. Everyone, they thought, greatly lost out with the change. The effect the lack of diversity had for West HS was even more compelling. Yes, they cited serious losses because of attending an all Black school, but even more important to them was the idea of difference itself that marked them in a special way. West HS students experienced being treated as different because they attended the all Black school; according to others, they *were* different. This seeped into how students interpreted interactions with them by peers and families at the other schools. Stares and comments treated them in spectacle-like fashion—something that signified they were different.

The lack of diversity, perhaps more than anything else, made their school less in what it could offer students, not because they were less as Blacks, but because of the direct influences diversity had on educational and social experiences and indirectly, on resource allocations that came with that diversity (by class, race, and sheer enrollment size). This would disadvantage their school in terms of choice as parents sought more diverse settings for their children that could offer more curricular opportunities. From this data section, West HS students clearly saw numerous curricular and extracurricular disadvantages for their school because the school system had set up their school in a way that it could not succeed.

#### Summary of Cross Case Analysis

An all Black school in this social context was wrong at the outset because it marked the West Side students as different. The white supremacist ideologies running rampant and the racism deeply embedded within the historical context of the local community would automatically mean the all Black school was less and the students attending it were bad. The students knew this, and the students attending the all Black school especially felt this distinction through virtually every aspect of their schooling. The division of the schools taught them that

they were bad Black kids people felt needed to be separated from the White and other students. For many of the students, this was the premise upon which the schools were created, which meant that students would not be able to change in community members' minds and hearts. The aftermath of resources fell into place with this belief making it impossible to offer comparable programs at West HS that the two larger integrated schools could, further exacerbating its lower status—actually naturalizing the idea that its students were indeed the bad Black kids everyone already knew them to be. Almost immediately curriculums and programs vastly differed across the schools, but it is now necessary to return to the purpose of this study to draw conclusions and recommendations based upon what it meant for the West HS students who experienced and read as a racialized text the social context created by the restructuring. This requires a review of the work of Kenneth Clark, who looked at the deleterious effects segregated school contexts had for children of color, which the next and final chapter, Chapter 6, will revisit through a discussion of the findings, with a presentation of conclusions and implications for further study.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Chapter 6 presents the discussion, conclusions, and implications of the current study on the meaning of resegregation for high school students in one school system. This interpretive ethnography was comprised of 135 student participants, with over 70 of their voices presented in Chapter 4 as they discussed their schooling experiences under the newly restructured high schools. In keeping with the tradition of educational ethnography, the meaning was not individual but a collective interpretation provided through students' observations of, experiences with, and responses to the new social context of the high schools under a unitary status-inspired restructuring that created an all Black school alongside two integrated schools.

This final chapter begins by summarizing the findings in relation to the study's two research questions. After providing a brief list of the material and symbolic effects that contributed to the meaning students made of the racially divided schools, these findings will be connected to the literature review. A general conclusion will then follow, with an epilogue of how West HS has fared the ten years of racially isolating West Side students through three policies crafted by leaders that increased race and class-based segregation after the grant of unitary status.

#### Discussion of Findings

The interview findings presented in Chapter 4 identified the sociocultural dimensions of the restructured schools significant to the students. A descriptive account of student meaning

was presented in detail through four broad data areas that reflected student responses. In Chapter 5, a cross case analysis provided collective findings by data area for all the students while highlighting their special significance, when present, for the racially marginalized students who attended the all Black West HS. The most salient theme that emerged from the data was that West HS students internalized a type of social deficit theory about themselves, one that was coded primarily by race and geographic area of the city, and to a lesser extent by class. This damaging effect was present through the intersection of material and symbolic aspects of the restructuring, which served to solidify a subordinate status for the West HS students.

The next step towards interpreting the findings from Chapter 4 is to answer the two research questions posed in Chapter 1. Each question is answered based upon the framework of educational ethnography, which serves as a descriptive account of the social context of schooling that took place when a substantial portion of one system's high school students were resegregated after a desegregation plan was ended, and the meaning students ascribed to this.

#### *Research Question One*

The first research question is presented below, though the order of the sub questions has been changed to better reflect student's interpretation of the change. The question is:

How are high school students interpreting the establishment of a partially resegregated school system as a result of mandatory school district restructuring? This question includes how students understood (1) the curricular options available to them, (2) extracurricular options tied to community funding, (3) views of the new schools given by others, including community members, media, and peers, as interpreted by students, and (4) the sense of possibility students had for their future education, employment, and participation in mainstream society.

Revisiting the first research question and its sub questions, the following conclusions may be made from this research. The restructuring produced numerous types of ill effects for the students assigned to the all Black West HS, as noted by the students across the schools. Resources the schools started out with (the building timeline, private donations, and enrollment size) interacted with each other, affecting West HS's curriculum in negative ways, more so than for the two integrated schools. A much smaller enrollment led to fewer curricular options for a host of courses, electives, the opportunity to take college track courses, the opportunity to attain a college track diploma, and extracurricular programs. West HS students often attributed this difference to having fewer teachers, which came with their much smaller high school enrollment. They would lose programs to other schools because of scheduling constraints that prevented participation or not receive as much support, with fewer positive school outcomes. Barriers to offering extracurricular programs were further exacerbated for West HS by its comparative lacks in private donations. These were some immediate effects. This drew attention to West High's extra small enrollment, prompting talk among West HS students to get peers to come back. A low enrollment affected participation rates and outcomes from extracurricular activities that would deter attracting students to West HS. These were all material inequalities, and yet, as the West HS students continually pointed out, the material lacks they faced were borne out of a symbolic inequality that pre-existed the restructuring—they were the students who had to be separated out by the racial division of students in the first place because White parents did not want them in schools with their children. This had the effect of marking West students as less than their peers—an idea that frequently surfaced in their responses and explanations of features of the restructuring. Leaders were less willing to invest in them, held lower expectations for them, and would structure their school such that it could not succeed as the other two did. Theirs

would never be a school of choice. The material inequities, then, further inscribed this status of less as West HS became the school students avoided or would not necessarily return to once it finally did have a new building. Students from the other two schools read this social text as well, though given the disparities in program outcomes, often concluded that West HS students did not try as hard or were not academically motivated. West HS was, as far as they could see, a problem school. To them the logical response was for West students to give up the idea of being equal to the larger integrated schools that already had demonstrated success in a host of programs. They would never be able to attain this level of success and needed to accept this.

The lacks in programs from West's extra small enrollment, fewer faculty sponsors, the building time lag, and low donations, would affect programs in ways that reinforced the image that West HS students lacked interest and motivation. The system's placement of many lower achieving students into a small high school affected composite test scores, reinforcing the idea that West HS students were disengaged with learning. Local media would reflect this hierarchy for the system's three high schools through bias by how recognitions and school incidents were reported or not reported. The two integrated high schools immediately became the schools parents and students would choose, something the West HS students noted. As they put it, given the demographic make-up of the new integrated schools and the growth they enjoyed, it was unlikely that theirs would become a school of choice, even with a new building. Despite much leadership rhetoric of equality, they saw this was not the case for West HS.

All of this had meaning for the students. Though promised a new building, undecided issues over location, plus time lags in construction led West HS students to believe that West HS's new building was not a priority from the start, unlike the case of the new buildings for the other students. They interpreted the delays as indication that they were regarded as less than



their peers by school leaders, though they argued that since all the high schools had proceeded from the former West HS no such distinction should have been made. West students saw that fewer private donations affected their athletics and other extracurricular programs, but because these seemed to be supported well at the other two schools, they felt they were marked by the community as less worthy of such investment. Both material indicators—delays in a new building and fewer private donations, while hard on programs, meant West HS students were not seen as worthy of receiving support by those who had the means to provide these resources. Over time, West HS became the invisible school while the two large integrated schools solidified their relationship as athletic rivals. Their teams continued to grow while the diminishing enrollment at West made team building difficult to replicate the other two schools' progress, continual proof to the East and North students that West HS was less and did not quite fit in. These were ways that the material aspects of the restructuring fed the symbolic and reinforced or confirmed it, though it was often difficult for West HS students to separate their prior status of being less—based upon the racialized text of the school context they read—as many believed this had led to the material differences they experienced.

A surprise in the student responses was the extent to which the participants from West HS paid attention to even subtle cues from media representation—something they felt strongly disadvantaged their school and actually promoted its ascription of less to the community. This great sensitivity to what was and was not placed in the public narrative bore witness to the vulnerability they felt towards its power to portray their school to the greater community. This was significant, as West HS students relayed numerous stories of their conversations with community members, including peers, about the schools. Through their social networks, they knew people paid attention to both the written and the verbal commentary about their school.

Both sensitized them to a public ascription of less, though through private interactions they often used themselves as examples, hoping to undo this misrepresentation they sensed was adversely affecting their school's growth and progress. Another unexpected response from West students was the degree to which the process of the restructuring was significant for them from its inception. Their early recalls of the consequences this would have as fifth graders and then again as middle school students left an indelible mark on how they interpreted the symbolic nature of something most school leaders considered business as usual. Despite frequent assurances by leaders that everything would be equal for the middle schools as well as for the high schools, they experienced something quite different that led them to conclude that the rhetoric of fairness was just that—only words that vastly differed from the social text of racial subordination that they now experienced in every aspect of their schooling. Of all the participants in the study, only West HS students could articulate the various justifications leaders gave for the restructuring, providing an unusually sophisticated assessment of the change that pointed to the contradictions they lived as it was implemented. For West students, the curriculum they experienced at the all Black school was closely associated with the broader social text of racial subordination reflected in a color blind ideology espoused by local leaders—a stance that provided anything but equal opportunity. Given this reality, they often questioned the moral integrity of leaders.

#### *Research Question Two*

The second research question follows: What social and cultural labels are framing students' interpretations? This question included the following sub question: how are students' interpretations of the restructuring related to them as students and citizens?

West's low enrollment led West HS students to scrutinize the symbolic effects the restructuring had on their school to explain why their school remained so small and why non-

Black students did not enroll, especially given the rhetoric of attracting students to the city schools. Though students identified the material reality of choice, they often interpreted its symbolic significance. West's subordinate status was confirmed by the avoidance of Black and non-Black peers to attend West HS. While this could be interpreted as a reflection of class identity (i.e., from middle class Blacks), they knew that Black families, regardless of class background, would prefer a more racially diverse schooling context for their children. Students identified ways in which the West HS students were pathologized by community members through encounters with them—something that continually informed them of their lower status as students and the lower status of their school. They read this social text as a community-wide ascription that they were stereotypical bad Black adolescents. Their frequent references to being considered as bad Black kids or West Side kids or ghetto or even the garbage people indicated that they believed the community saw them as the students who fought, were dangerous, were wild, and were academically unmotivated—in other words, not just less but bad. Frequent reminders of this status came to them—people shunned their school as the one that was unsafe and had lots of fights. Without the evidence to back this up, West students supposed that they were seen as synonymous with the danger from past crime events in their area of the city—events that usually made the front page of the newspaper. But this ascription of being a dangerous school meant West HS students were coterminous with the adults who committed crimes in their surrounding area. Students at the integrated schools voiced surprise that nothing bad had happened at West HS—and admitted thinking it would have had the first major incident. That neither happened did not undo their view that it still was bad anyway. Everyone already knew this to be true, and whether this was more an effect of the white supremacist ideology functioning in the broader social text of society through impressions of the neighborhoods that

West HS served or the adult behavior in the school's surroundings, seemingly little evidence was needed to confirm such belief.

West students showed great resistance to their negative image, refuting these comments with facts to indicate that of the three schools, only theirs had not had any major bad incidents. They went further in their defense, at times providing statistics on fights at their school in attempts to change this perception of them and their school. They knew living near the housing projects marked them (and all the West Side schools) as dangerous, but constant references to undo this belief showed how deeply they knew this marked them.

Enrollment numbers aside, perhaps the one factor that most marked their school as less was that White students did not enroll in their school—not even to take the prestigious IB diploma program. It was in conversations about the racial separation that students' sense that they were marked with a subordinate status came out strongly. The resegregation itself, first with the demographic profiles and then with the expectation that more students would be zoned back to West HS because the integrated schools were “too Black” was a clear indication of this subordinate status. But students often stated it was not their White peers who had wanted the racial separation. They talked about the restructuring frequently with peers in mixed settings and knew it was not desired by White students. They believed it was White parents who wanted the West Side Black students separated from White students (though some believed this was also wanted by racist city and education leaders). White parents, they stated, thought they were less capable of learning so would hold the White children back.

Students from all three schools, in varying degrees, read the social text of the restructured schools as evidence that racist practices were alive and well in their city, state, and region. They saw the school policy further polarized the city along a color line—something they greatly

lamented and decried as wrong. They surmised that the policy had been leveraged by people with money and political influence, and that there would be no way to ever overcome such deeply entrenched racist policies even if they disagreed with them. In other words, even as West students felt shortchanged by how the goods of educational opportunity through public education were being allocated through the design of the restructuring, students from all three schools expressed frustration with how local policies could override commitments they felt most upheld the ideal of racial equality through public schooling. These were some of the lessons they read from the social text of resegregation.

Over time, and as predicted by many, both race and class segregation were intensified across the system's schools—an argument that was denied when the restructuring was first proposed. The negative consequences of curricular inequality as well as the psychological and emotional burdens the West High students carried cannot be ignored. Separation by race had these damaging effects on the students, but so too did the racial and social isolation and marginalization that worked against preparing them for post-secondary education and the world of work because of how these are inextricably intertwined with curriculum. This speaks to the purpose of the research, which was to provide a different type of argument for maintaining schools that are integrated in the substantive sense. This requires a look at the study's findings in light of the legal code that undergirds such educational contexts.

#### *The Fourteenth Amendment and Equal Protection*

The findings surface important issues regarding the place of race-based measures for building assignment after school systems come out from desegregation orders. The Fourteenth Amendment is interpreted as safeguarding a color blind society for all of its citizens with equal protection under the law that does not distinguish its members by race. Although this type of

argument under *Brown* led to the need to desegregate White schools to undo a blatantly unequal dual system of education, more recent interpretations of color blindness have shifted to the position that race should never be used in any policies of public institutions, including schools. The standard of approaching the democratic ideal of a color blind society is taken to mean that policies considering race can no longer be permissible as a fair way of designating access to certain resources. This profoundly affects public school policies with regard to school assignment, where even voluntary integration plans are now prohibited if race is used to decide placement. Such a position is dangerous, as it assumes that the vestiges of racial discrimination no longer affect the type of access children of color have to educational opportunity, thereby proclaiming all Black schools as equitable to integrated schools.

In a philosophical position of equal protection, justice would demand that one's race would neither unfairly advantage nor disadvantage anyone prior to enacting any actions that the state planned to implement. Policies as presented on paper, however, often do not work out as planned. Unforeseen consequences can take place as a policy is implemented that advantage or disadvantage some or even many of the members to which it pertains. The restructuring policy in this study is unusual in that from an empirical standpoint, the all Black school was marked as less before it was ever created, and that in significant ways. Concern about this continually surfaced across the community initially as restructuring plans were considered, and over time, as indicated by the data.

I bring up the philosophical scrutiny of school policy, as Kant's categorical imperative demands that people must never be used as a means to an end. This ideal was broken by local school leaders, which puts into question the degree to which equal protection is honored through a restructuring that resegregated high school students. Through a neighborhood schools

structure, an all Black high school was created that would change the demographics of the other two high schools to make them more attractive to White students. From the planning stages, then, this ascribed a lower status to the all Black school where the sought-after students would never enroll. As Bell (2004) and Ogletree (2004) have argued, the color blind position of the court today has removed the term segregation, yet has kept racial subordination intact through institutionalized racism, clearly a characteristic of the restructured schools. This type of social subordination in school assignment was a concern Justice Breyer pointed out in his dissenting opinion for the Seattle 2007 case, which was presented in Chapter 1. As he argued, segregationist policies under Jim Crow were not just about building assignment—though this greatly disadvantaged Black children with regard to resources and access to curriculum. Such racial separation held great ramifications for creating a status of subordination, something the findings in this study found to be true for the all Black high school. Unlike the two new schools that would be integrated in the restructured arrangement, the all Black school would not be a school of choice—something that signaled (and guaranteed) inequality materially and symbolically before the schools were ever built, and something students noted frequently as it intensified these inequalities once the restructuring was implemented. Nevertheless, courts today allow for such structural inequity after the grant of unitary status. This is because great focus has been placed on the assumption that dividing students by race for integration to gain a more general group social benefit comes at the expense of preserving an individual's rights, as Justice Roberts argued in the Seattle 2007 case. In other words, the scope of the way the Court views student assignment plans based upon race favors individual rights over a vision of the type of society we wish to have. The findings in the present study point to flaws in this argument. A removal of the racial subordinate status students of color experience in the broader society is

necessary to guarantee their individual rights as students and citizens, making access to educational opportunity key to moving in this direction. While Justice Roberts and the concurring justices have set the requirement of proof that there is substance to the education provided by integrated settings, they have ignored the deleterious academic and emotional effects for children of color when one race schools for them are set up alongside integrated schools that offer blatantly differing curriculum. Absent, then, is the symbolic effect of status that demographics at the building level create through the hidden curriculum of diversity. Everything about the design of the restructuring indicated that the racial division was necessary to get more White students back into the system, but with the clear understanding that White and/or middle class private school families would never select West HS as a school of choice. The system's leaders and community task force addressed the problem of racially dividing the students by proposing that the resegregation *might* be short term and hopefully in the long run, *might* allow the shortchanged students at West HS to eventually benefit, as stated in the Restructuring Committee's report (2000) and later quoted in a news article prior to opening the new high schools (Wortham, 2003b). Ten years later, as could have been predicted—and as much of Orfield and Eaton's research (1996) had already extensively documented—this possibility is nowhere in sight without drastic intervention.

#### *Negative and Affirmative Action*

Outcomes of *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 included two broad ways of protecting people of color from unjust practices formerly allowed by Jim Crow laws under *Plessy* and other extralegal measures to separate Blacks from Whites. One form of protection was the creation of negative action in the form of school desegregation measures for public schools. Negative actions would serve to protect the rights of children of color regarding



access to educational opportunities by ensuring that school districts did not create dual systems of education that clearly disadvantaged Black children. Negative action was also seen as the way to undo the harmful effects of racial segregation in public schools. This has been enforced through indicators stipulated by the *Green Factors* to ensure vestiges of segregation had been undone prior to the grant of unitary status. Importantly, measures of substantive educational outcomes were never part of the *Green Factors*, and second generation segregation in large desegregated high schools that continued to track Black students to lower, non-academic levels of curriculum has never adequately been addressed (Mickelson, 1999, 2001, 2005). Nevertheless, negative actions through various types of desegregation plans that required court oversight were an integral part of ensuring equal protection for children of color.

Affirmative action was the other measure of equal protection taken by the court by the 1960s amid the Civil Rights Movement, which targeted minorities (including women) for employment and educational opportunities in post-secondary institutions. This remediation recognized that the effects of the dual educational system and extralegal discrimination disadvantaged Blacks generationally in employment and higher education (See Peter Irons' *May it Please the Court*, 1999; Wills, 2003). Since its inception, there has been great resistance to affirmative action and in recent years a color blind ideology has been used to justify a rollback in those programs. Affirmative action policies continue to be dismantled as courts have decided that the use of racial preferences is inequitable and therefore unjust. Today, efforts at integration to mitigate barriers to education that many youth of color still face are not allowed, including undergraduate admissions policies, such as was ruled in the case for the University of Michigan (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003). This has extended into the use of voluntary race-based assignment policies in public schools for the benefit of diversity (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v.*

*Seattle School District No. 1*, 2007). More importantly, the special protection ordered by *Brown* and supported by the Fourteenth Amendment of negative action to protect the right to educational opportunity for children of color is now treated as comparable to affirmative action and therefore, dispensable. Affirmative action was created as an extra measure in attempts to compensate victims for the cumulative negative effects of Jim Crow laws and inequitable educational opportunities that affected employment and wealth building, which are inextricably tied to the purchase of education for greater economic advancement and opportunities (Mills, 2003). Negative action (and thus, the protection of negative rights) by court intervention through school desegregation orders was never designed as an extra. Rather, the spirit of *Brown* was to safeguard the shaping effect schools had on children by no longer allowing a dual system to operate based upon race that clearly marked one group as less or subordinate. Access to equal educational opportunity for children of color through legal intervention and protection was one important goal. Equality as persons was inherent in this process—institutional policies (legal or *de facto*) that structured public education contexts in ways that created racial subordination were impermissible. This spoke to the importance of the psychosocial effects of degrading school contexts on children of color through the overt practices of racial segregation. What was considered to be a substantive protection of equal rights for all children to a worthy education, as expressed by Justice Warren in his opinion to the court (Kluger, 1977), has been withdrawn, much like affirmative action. This newer interpretation of *Brown* functions as though genuine access to educational opportunity, absent a social hierarchical context, is now guaranteed in color blind policies, thus requiring no oversight. Without such protection, however, a scenario worse than *Plessy* runs rampant with our public schools: the creation of unequal, racially segregated, often, underperforming schools for children of color is legally sanctioned.

*A Substitute for Educational Substance: Compensatory Programs*

Further problems extend beyond how schools assess access to opportunity (at least regarding inequities with funding for poor urban schools). Studies have indicated vast differences in the funding of urban minority schools, often in the form of non-certified or inexperienced teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Kozol, 2005). But tracking by building can still take place where there are no apparent funding disparities in per pupil spending within a school district. In the present case, per pupil spending was actually greater in the higher poverty, all Black schools within the school system. As Orfield and Eaton's findings (1996) pointed out, compensatory programs are rarely synonymous with equity regarding *access* to educational opportunity in the robust sense of the term. The use of strict per pupil funding as a basis of measure, or more specifically, comparison of funding by school devoid of the social context is a questionable measure for proclaiming equal educational opportunity because this neither safeguards against racial subordination practices nor guarantees equal access to academic opportunity, which, as the present study indicated, are complexly tied to practices of institutionalized racism. This speaks to the need for legal protection for children of color by providing scrutiny of school structures to ensure they are designed in ways that allow them to offer a full range of substantive educational opportunities as the norm for all students.

The grant of unitary status requires school system leaders to promise not to recreate a dual educational system. But this minimal level of protection, and that, for our societies' most fragile and vulnerable members who must rely on this for access to educational opportunity, is made to no effect with the new color blind position of the court. This promise is easily broken as leaders speculate that neighborhood schools will be equal, justifying demographic inequalities through resegregation for a season with the hopes that some day they may be rectified as White

and middle class flight is turned around. This research documents the case of one school system's actions after the grant of unitary status that in three policy decisions over the course of nine years not only undid a relatively desegregated system, but also recreated a dual system that signaled in myriad ways to children of color that they were less—they were not desired in the schools that White children attended, they were not expected to succeed academically, and they did not deserve comparable levels of support (and all that this implies in the schooling context) because they were Black. People could argue that this was not the intent of the restructuring, but this was the effect that it had. The restructuring set up multiple barriers for advanced level educational and other learning opportunities to a large group of working class Black children at the secondary level that continued to be offered to the rest of the system's students. In every aspect of this schooling context, Black students read the social text of inferiority placed upon them with the creation of an all Black school, including how families responded to a social context steeped in white supremacist ideals through their selecting and supporting the other two integrated schools.

The primary goal of this research was to present a different type of argument against the rollback of desegregation by documenting student experiences of resegregation during the initial three years of its inception. A school system resegregated a portion of its students while maintaining integrated schools for the rest, thus creating an unusual experimental context that normally would never have been permitted under International Review Board policies. Had the school system needed to pass scrutiny for such an experiment, it would have been denied unequivocally in light of the plethora of research that could have fairly accurately predicted the devastating achievement outcomes for children of color from such policy (Orfield & Eaton, 1996). Sadly, this was the context that was created, so although the research was naturalistic and

not experimental, the findings speak to some of the effects of such social engineering. This study was unique in that it followed students side by side as they lived the new context of a modern day inception of policy that in many ways resembled Jim Crow practices through racially separating students. When *Plessy* was finally challenged in *Brown*, the type of evidence used to argue against it was the social science research of Kenneth Clark, to which I will now liken the present study for drawing implications and conclusions.

### *Revisiting the Work of Kenneth Clark*

Like Kenneth Clark found with his young participants, students in the present study internalized a kind of deficit theory about themselves—one that was coded by race, geographic region, and to a lesser extent, class identity. Clark emphasized important limitations to the implications he could draw from his work, as presented in Chapter 2. Though it was difficult to separate the effects of school segregation from the racial separation and marginalization operating in the broader social context, his studies indicated that schools played a role in teaching children of color their inferior status. Trager (in Kluger, 1977; Radke & Trager, 1950), likewise, asserted to the court that the role of schools was significant in that they had a “shaping effect” on how children understood race, even from an early age, as discussed in Chapter 2. The present study differed from Kenneth Clark’s work in that it was not based upon psychological evaluation and student identity, yet through descriptive evidence of cultural ethnography used the type of argument Clark presented as to the significance of the role schools play in social formation through students’ relationships with others in this context. Clark made the argument that students of color were affected by segregated schools in clearly damaging ways, recognizing that schools were complicit with the racist structures present in the broader social context of the pre *Brown* era. Schools do not operate in a vacuum; neither do students’ socialization processes

within schools operate unrelated to the surrounding social context. Schools function within the broader social context, and as such, are influenced to some degree by its ideologies and political economy, all of which become part of the curriculum of the school alongside academic and other subject matter—making practices of resegregation particularly harmful to children as they reinforce rather than mitigate the racial subordination that proliferates in our society.

The focus of this study was to examine the meaning students made of the creation of an all Black high school within an increasingly segregated schooling context for many of the system's students. It is important to reiterate Clark's warning that there is no way to separate out the effects of school structures and practices on children from those existing at the macro-social level outside the school. In looking at the effects of a policy that treated children of color in a clearly disparaging way, it would still be difficult to isolate these from the effects of the latent discourses and social practices present in a region characterized by a history of white supremacist ideology. This is especially true for the student participants assigned to the all Black high school who already lived within a racially marginalized context on the city's West Side. Although this distinction had somewhat disappeared with the desegregated middle and high schools the return to a resegregated structure now reinforced a subordinate status for these children.

Clark maintained that his findings provided evidence of a stigma of race that was present in both the broader social context and public schools, but that this was reinforced *within* the school by the practices of school segregation (in Kluger, 1977). In the present study, West HS students noted many demeaning terms used to describe them and saw that they were avoided or treated differently by peers because they were the students attending an all Black school. It was

the stigma of creating and assigning students to an all Black school that prompted this study, which focused on the meaning for students of its effects as they read this social text.

### *Implications of the Study in View of Clark's Work*

An important goal of Clark's work was to examine prejudice from the target's perspective, thus pioneering work in minority representation. Frances Cherry (2004) highlighted that Clark's work was grounded in the social context that real social groups encountered rather than the stark isolation of the laboratory or detached survey questionnaires that could not deeply explore experiences of racial discrimination used by most of his contemporaries. Clark's ethnographic approaches allowed him to ground his research in reflexivity as he negotiated how the researcher could work with powerless groups and find ways that would empower them. An important outcome of this has been Clark's vision of defining the problem of racism (though here I will use the term racial subordination to more clearly define the effects of the school context on the student participants) and its remedy. The fact of racial subordination, for Clark, needed to be addressed in all its ugliness and this struggle was never to let up until Blacks and Whites became equals in America. Clark believed the remedy to racial subordination was a leadership firmly attached to the concept of inevitability—the stance *Brown* originally upheld, though one that was soon truncated. The more recent color blind position of the court has likewise reversed this stance, and many believe like Clark, that this needs to be recouped today regarding school contexts (Pettigrew, 2004). Clark was cautious to note that desegregation as unequals would never be sufficient, thus signaling the dangers of a superficial response to a highly ethical and moral dilemma the United States continues to face in public education (Pettigrew). It is with this wisdom that the present study concurs. With so many inequalities in educational and economic advancement that Black Americans continue to face today through the

effects of racial subordination, Pettigrew believed it imperative to draw on Clark's vision to identify and attack the racial prejudice and discrimination that have become somewhat hidden though continue as strong as ever in our society, including our schools. One can look at the past to better appreciate Clark's vision—one that holds important implications for the present study.

Thomas Pettigrew (2004), in writing about Clark's many contributions to social psychology, highlighted several myths that now abound regarding racial relations in the United States. Perhaps the most important myth that continues to proliferate is that racial integration cannot be achieved in the United States. This diametrically opposes Clark's vision and belief that government and other institutions *could* achieve such integration, and that the key to achieving this was forceful leadership. Clark's vision, as mentioned above, comes from the concept of inevitability, which characterized the initial declaration of *Brown*, though was soon undermined when the court declared that desegregation was to take place "at all deliberate speed" (Bell, 2004; Kluger, 1977; Orfield & Eaton, 1996).

The U.S. Supreme Court's rulings on *Brown* created a perception of inevitability—an important precursor to acceptance of social changes (Pettigrew, 2004). This law set the course of action—dual systems were not ever to be permissible in public education. Resistance against *Brown* gained a foothold, however, and through the enactment of *Brown II* successfully undermined the process of making changes to school segregation for nearly twelve more years, something that scholars view the color blind ideology of today parallels (Bell, 2004; Ogletree, 2004). Weak implementation, Clark argued, had a drastically negative effect on attaining the ideals of social change regarding practices of racial subordination. But he believed that forceful leadership could uphold and maintain the ideal of equality though the concept of inevitability that was offered by *Brown* at its inception.



A color blind position of the court regarding the Fourteenth Amendment strips leaders of the type of forceful leadership Clark believed was crucial to maintaining integrated schools. In returning to the effects from how *Brown* is interpreted today, the flaw is that there is no inevitability for maintaining a school system that is unitary in the robust sense of the term. This does not exist with the *Green Factors*, which are the measures that undergird requirements for unitary status. In the local system, leaders very quickly created neighborhood middle and high schools after receiving the grant of unitary status, segregating a significant portion of the system's students at the secondary level. The zone lines created to attain unitary status were then dismantled by school leaders, further increasing segregation across the system by dismantling desegregated feeder elementary schools. As many of the West HS students pointed out, this racial separation led to misgivings about them and their school, creating a caste-like structure across the system's middle and high schools. Without community members, including peers at other schools, knowing the West High students personally, all types of negative images—including racial stereotypes and pejoratives abounded about the West HS students that they could not undo despite much resilience to survive this ascription and much personal effort to undo it.

### Implications

Based on the findings from this study, implications can be drawn for practice and further research regarding the place of race in public school assignment policies.

#### *Implications for Practice*

The findings for this study suggest the following two implications for practice:

1. In considering the extent to which students observed and understood the actions of the resegregation over time and internalized such a damaging ascription of less for a large portion of the systems secondary students, a serious question becomes, why the adults did not have clear

conversations with students about it. Administrators, teachers, and parents debated the restructuring, but based on the participants' responses, little was done to take advantage of student understanding to inoculate them from its damaging effects. In this case, very different relationships across the schools might otherwise have developed, and this might have led to very different types of responses to the restructuring (See Schmitke, 2003). This study suggests that there is a serious need to incorporate into the curriculum ways to elucidate the types of racial subordination that become part of the hidden curriculum of diversity in schools that racially isolate students. Teacher preparation in colleges of education must necessarily train teachers to be skilled at not accepting the color blind ideology rampant in the broader society. Rather they must be able to use this to tie students' experiences to the curriculum in ways that supply them with a language of critique that they can draw on to counteract racial subordination.

A second implication more directly addresses the preparation of school administrators who author and oversee attendance plans for our public schools.

2. With a focus on data driven decision making for school administrators and leaders in graduate programs, an important lack in their preparation in institutions of higher learning is a closer examination of how the sociocultural context of schools (informed by the presence of a color blind ideology in the broader society) affects educational outcomes. This is true for the serious negative impact color blind policies have on access to educational opportunity for children of color, especially with the popularity of creating neighborhood middle and high schools.

Compensatory programs, as least as the current study found, had little bearing on the significance the creation of an apartheid schooling context had for youth. For these high school students, it was unable to mitigate the profoundly negative social, intellectual, and emotional costs of the resegregated context.

### *Implications for Future Research*

The findings for this study lead to suggestions for subsequent research.

1. As indicated by the meaning students made of experiencing the social context of resegregation in the present case, it would be important to conduct further empirical study on the material differences across schools in school systems where resegregation has taken place, given the arguments that a color blind attendance policy is equal and equitable. While students attending the all Black school in the present study often cited barriers to their academic and social preparation for post-secondary education, especially their losses of access to a college track curriculum and diploma, these have not been empirically supported in this study other than to restate what students have said. This is a serious allegation for any school system that has resegregated its students and needs to be studied and included as an outcome of resegregated neighborhood school structures at the secondary level.

2. More research is needed to establish a pattern of the meaning resegregation holds for students in other systems that have restructured after ending desegregation orders, especially where neighborhood schools have replaced desegregated schools. There is a great lack in the literature on student meaning of this social context, making it difficult to understand the negative effects the newer color blind policies may be having on many children, especially children of color who are once again racially marginalized in public schools. The present study was unique in that students attending the all Black school received markedly less material resources by way of the building timeline, the timeline for receiving restructuring monies, community funding through private donations, and enrollment size, which only served to reinscribe the status of less for them. This greatly restricts the generalizability of the findings. While significant patterns of cultural subordination were present regarding the symbolic ways the all Black school and the

students attending it were marked as less, it would be important to replicate studies in school systems where such marked material distinctions were not present, as these may have exaggerated student responses to the restructuring.

3. Meaning as an outcome of resegregation should be a type of research that serves to support a concerted effort to unmask the types of institutionalized racism rampant in public education policies, with the end of providing a tool for accountability after the grant of unitary status to school systems. This, in turn, needs to become part of expert witness to courts when school integration plans are challenged (especially race based assignment policies), as it offers a way to respond to the issues of educational substance for individuals, access to equal educational opportunity, and the elimination of maintaining racial subordination in public schools, all of which continue to be compelling interests for the state regarding public school integration.

#### Final Considerations

As argued at the outset of the study, it was posed that resegregation could be an unintended consequence of a color blind ideology in school policy undergirded by the court's interpretation of the Fourteenth Amendment. In the present case, resegregation was an intended consequence of the restructuring after the grant of unitary status, and one that had a damaging impact on the schooling experiences for a large portion of one school system's adolescents. Students in the present study showed resilience to practices of racial separation under the school policy and resistance to the ascription of less that came with the stigma of resegregation, but they expended a great amount of psychological and emotional energy with these responses to the restructured schools as they attempted undo the racist beliefs of adults in the community. Students were almost certainly correct in many of their interpretations of the way the school system's restructuring policy was playing out. Despite district protests to the contrary, it is

difficult to plausibly claim that the creation of a 100% African-American school in a racially diverse community was the result of race-blind zoning processes. Curricular options were being narrowed at West HS high school. Academic performance has dropped over the course of time since this study was conducted, repeating a pattern that has been documented around the country and particularly across the South (Orfield & Eaton, 1996; Boger & Orfield, 2005; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005) as discussed in Chapter 2. Separate and unequal educational structures comparable to the one created in this research are being created across the nation with the new color blind interpretation of *Brown*. This would suggest that until we recognize that white supremacy exists and until we make concerted efforts to undo this on a culture wide level, it will never be safe to recreate an all-Black school in integrated school systems.

### *Epilogue*

The present study documents the extent to which creating an all Black school alongside two integrated schools resulted in deleterious effects on children of color as this distinction categorized them into a subordinate status, in addition to compromising their access to educational opportunities in ways that re-inscribed this lower status. This was further emphasized by their anticipation of the rezoning—many heard that the integrated schools were still “too Black,” illustrating that in general, Blackness was bad and that Black students were undesired in the schools Whites attended. Students, it turned out, were correct about their predictions of the rezoning. Fourteen months after the interviews where students named the places that would be sent back to West HS the vote was held to approve the rezoning plan. On May 3, 2007 the Board voted to send students “back” from both East and North region, as many West students had correctly predicted. The superintendent and the demographer asserted that they had used a color blind approach, and this was continually repeated in news reportage and at

board meetings. This third wave of resegregation now removed Black students from feeder elementary schools and the integrated high schools by changing zone lines originally drawn in 1996 to receive unitary status.

So why is this important? Notably, in 2007 the all Black high school became the high school with the state's highest dropout rate, a statistic that was repeated<sup>36</sup> in the fall of 2008 (Reeves, 2008; "Tuscaloosa's Drop-out Rate," 2007). The study's eleventh grade participants had graduated in 2007, but this was the first group to go through the resegregated middle *and* high schools after the desegregation plan was dismantled. This bore witness to the long term effects of racially and socioeconomically isolating students for their entire secondary level trajectory. Tragically, all the West Side students are now isolated for their entire school trajectory—from prekindergarten through twelfth grade. Some teachers mentioned that with former big West HS High there had been a two hundred student drop off between the ninth/tenth grade campus and the eleventh/twelfth grade campus. Though somewhat hidden from the greater community, the restructuring brought this out with the creation of the extra small all Black school, as several teachers, administrators, and other educators often pointed out. That this type of policy for public education can escape legal scrutiny is troubling and demands some type of assessment of the place of race in public education with the court's newer interpretations and administration of *Brown*.

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<sup>36</sup> See the August 5, 2008, *The Tuscaloosa News* article by Steve Reeves. West HS was the only one of the three city high schools to meet all of its goals for AYP, showing improvement in its graduation rate—now 50%, an increase over its 2007 rate of 46%. The 2007-08 graduation rates lowered by several percentage points for the North and East high schools, possibly an effect of sending over 80 students "back" to West HS. Still, West HS remained the high school with the state's lowest graduation rate for the second year in a row.

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APPENDIX  
STUDENT FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

*Student Focus Group Interview Protocol*

For the purposes of the transcription, state your name, the school you are enrolled at, and any extracurricular activities you participate in. Your name will not be used, but it is needed to help identify who is speaking in the transcripts.

1. Why did the restructuring take place?
2. Have you been to the other campuses? What do you think about the new facilities at North High? East High? West High?
3. What are the advantages—if any--of the new school arrangement? By new school arrangement, I mean having 3 separate high schools as opposed to one mega high school.
4. What are the disadvantages of the new school arrangement, if any?
5. What effect, if any, has having 3 high schools in the district had on the courses you are taking?

Academic: On electives? On the AP classes? On the IB program?

Extracurricular: On after school activities? On athletics? On student government?

6. What conversations have you had with your friends about North HS? East HS? West HS?
7. What types of conversations have you heard from community members of the city of Rivertown about North HS? East HS? West HS?
8. If you could speak to members of the school board, what changes, if any, should they implement to make the city schools better?

9. If you could make any changes you wish, how would you envision your school [West High School] [North High School] [East High School] for the future?
  
10. Do you have anything that you want to say about the restructuring that I have not asked you? What question(s) would you like to have us ask other students?

Thank you for your participation in this project.