Echoes of a dream deferred

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"This is a case of a dream deferred." -- John Brittain, 1992, opening the case of Sheff v. O'Neill in a Connecticut courtroom.

Almost 40 years earlier, Brown v. Board of Education had ruled that, in America's classrooms, separate is not equal. And now 19 children from Hartford claimed that segregation "enabled and sustained by . . . school district boundary lines" barred them from an equal education.

I lived in Connecticut then, where my daughter attended first grade in the suburbs. I vaguely recall the rumors of busing, the talk of inter-district magnet schools. But "The Children in Room E4," by Susan Eaton, vividly tells the story. By the time I moved to York in 1998 and my daughter flew off to college in 2004, Sheff was still dragging its way through court and its lead plaintiff had grown to adulthood.

"Why are the Hartford schools more segregated than when the whole case began?" one lawyer asked. "I don't understand why nothing changes."

It's a question that echoes still.

On March 25, at a public interview for superintendent of York City schools, a gentleman stood and questioned the candidate. "What will change? Fifty-four years since Brown and nothing has changed."

But then that man turned the question around. "What are we going to do?" he asked, and what changed was his point of view. "Our kids will suffer if we don't do something now." One woman spoke of visiting her son's 10th-grade classroom. The kids wanted her to come back. "We got taught best that day," they told her.

On Feb. 26, APA released the results of a study of York County Schools. The only districts -- Central, Dallastown, Southern, Suburban -- to score above the state average in reading and math were the ones that offered the highest starting pay to teachers.

In 2005-06, almost 80 percent of York City students were economically disadvantaged; its 2007 graduation rate was 64 percent. Meanwhile, those four high-achieving districts had graduation rates above 90 percent and poverty levels below 20 percent.

James DeBord of YorkCounts spoke of the 1980s as a period of school integration. "We're going backward," he said. "We won't have success in the county while one district lives in poverty."

It's a story that echoes across the nation.

America's Promise Alliance reports that 17 U.S. cities have graduation rates below 50 percent. Economic segregation is on the rise. Meanwhile, the 2006 Program for International Student

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Assessment ranked U.S. students below average in math and science among 57 countries studied.

Matt Miller (The Atlantic, Jan/Feb 08) blames local control, which prevents uniform standards and economies of scale, and which leaves local boards to appropriate multi-million dollar budgets, balance the will of taxpayers and teachers, and ensure the success of our students in a global society. Linda Darling-Hammond (Time, Feb. 25) searches for answers in top-ranked countries such as Finland, where the government plays a central role in the funding of education and teacher training.

In York County, local control concentrates poverty in city schools, forces taxes sky-high in the suburbs, makes neighboring districts compete for teachers and denies equal education and diversity to all. Demanding that our government do more is not abdicating control of our children's education. It is taking charge of our democracy, holding our government to the task of serving its people.

My children attend good schools. So why should I care? Because I believe that the power of education can mend this world far faster than any military might. It is the driving force behind critical thinking and social awareness, a human right that should not be left to the greed of free-market forces or the wealth of individual communities. Because every dream -- deferred or achieved -- affects us all.

Besides, maybe local control is not about maintaining 16 different school boards. Maybe it's more about the parent who shows up in the classroom, the community member who looks inward for answers, the teacher who connects with the child in front of him. It's about the student who refuses to defer the dream, and the activist in each of us who recognizes inequity and refuses to look away.

Leaving the APA meeting in February, one woman said, "In 20 years they'll still be talking about the same things. I don't get my hopes up anymore." Like the plaintiffs in Sheff, she's heard too much empty talk, too many plans that go nowhere. The tragedy is that children's lives don't wait.

"What happens to a dream deferred?" Langston Hughes first posed the question in 1951 in his poem, "Harlem [2]." The response, even today, is a constant refrain: "I don't understand why nothing changes."

"What will change?"

". . . while one district lives in poverty."

"I don't get my hopes up anymore."

The echoes build to the poet's reply, more shock wave than echo, more endless question than answer: "Does it explode?"

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