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Equal Schools: Broward's Unkept Promise

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In 1987, a federal court ruled that Broward's predominantly black schools must be made essentially equal to white schools.

It's more than a decade later. Despite some progress, that hasn't happened.

Black schools like Boyd Anderson High and Northside Elementary, concentrated in the east, are generally older and are more likely to have leaky ceilings, flooded walkways, missing floor tiles, clunky computers, rotting portables and costly problems with asbestos.

White schools like Tradewinds Elementary and Indian Ridge Middle, situated mostly in the west, are newer and generally boast fresher paint jobs, modern computers, better libraries, nicer athletic facilities and greener landscaping.

It will take money to close this gap. But a comprehensive Herald study of capital spending since 1987 found that, despite the court order, black schools have received few additional dollars to bring them to parity.

In the 10-year period starting in 1987, the Broward school district spent an average of \$6,217 per student at black schools, compared with \$5,968 at white schools -- essentially the same.

Broward Superintendent Frank Petruzielo says the district spent big out west because booming growth created a demand for new classrooms.

"You can't blame the school system for where houses were built," he said.

The district built or rebuilt 22 white schools, 21 integrated schools and nine black schools. Only one of the black schools, Thurgood Marshall Elementary in Fort Lauderdale, was new.

Advocates for black students find little comfort in the numbers.

"Funding these schools equally is not equitable," said Charles Washington, a professor at Florida Atlantic University and an outspoken education activist. "If you've got a dilapidated school or anything you've neglected over time, you are not helping by funding it equally. You have to give additional resources to catch up."

In theory, Petruzielo agrees. His often-stated mission: to devote unequal resources to the unequal needs found in many older eastern schools.

A Fresh Opportunity

New construction funds in pipeline for schools

The district has historically fallen short of that mark. Now, as Broward prepares to spend upward of \$800 million on school construction, it has another chance to make good on that commitment. But dividing up the pie will likely involve much politics and jockeying.

Petruzielo says the district does the best it can with limited resources.

"You've got unmet needs here the size of the Grand Canyon," he said. "But this district has been more sensitive to the needs of the urban schools than any other I've seen."

However, the district's recently approved technology policy seems, deliberately or not, destined to exacerbate inequities between old and new, black and white. New schools, concentrated in the west, get four computers and a teacher laptop

in every classroom; older ones get two computers and half the number of laptops.

The inequities, some say, are unconscionable -- but consistent with the way black students have been treated historically.

In Broward's old "colored schools," classes were recessed for the winter months -- as recently as the 1950s -- so students could pick beans during the harvest. Textbooks were outdated hand-me-downs from the white schools. Desks were carved with the initials of the white students who formerly occupied them.

Even after the landmark Supreme Court ruling that outlawed "separate but equal" schools, officials here refused to desegregate the schools. In the 1970s, a suit was filed in federal court to force integration. In 1984, another was filed and resulted in a settlement agreement three years later called the Consent Decree, hammered out by then School Board member Neil Sterling and attorney George Allen.

The decree, which the court agreed to enforce, called for magnet programs as well as hiring quotas for black teachers and administrators, and instructed the district to make black schools "essentially equal" to white schools.

With their tattered books and hand-me-down desks, black schools had much catching up to do. They have certainly made gains over the years. But even district officials admit inequities remain.

Subtle, But Still There

Disparities can involve PCs, fences, furnishings

Today, most of the disparities are more subtle than they were in the 1950s.

It's a chain-link fence at Charles Drew Elementary instead of the royal palms lining the entrance at Riverglades Elementary. It's slow, outdated Apple IIe computers at Miramar High instead of Power Macs at Flanagan High.

It's a Dandy Middle vs. a Tequesta Trace Middle.

Tequesta is a lushly landscaped, freshly painted, impeccably maintained campus on Indian Trace in Weston. It sits next to a city park that serves as a spacious athletic complex for the school.

Reporters visiting Dandy, on Northwest 26th Street in Fort Lauderdale, found a much different situation: a graffiti-marred, sparsely landscaped facility with food-stained rugs and walls and doors with broken handles. Bathroom stalls were missing toilet seats, and paper-towel dispensers had been ripped away.

Says Petruzielo: "We are not funded to do the kind of maintenance on our facilities that would make them state-of-the-art."

And yet, 8-year-old Tequesta recently received a \$600,000 face lift to remedy sweating walls, falling stucco and other problems.

Dandy, which has the same design and the same problems, is still waiting.

Citing problems like those at Dandy, a group of black parents filed a lawsuit two years ago to force the district to bring black schools up to standard. Citizens Concerned About Our Children amassed 5,000 photographs of shoddy conditions.

The group had hoped to air its complaints in a courtroom, but in January U.S. District Judge Kenneth Ryskamp dismissed the suit without a trial. His ruling: There might be inequities, but the school district did not intentionally discriminate.

Two years earlier, Ryskamp lifted the court order that required Broward to make black and white schools equal.

A Case In Point

At Boyd Anderson High, rain raised an obstacle

When the heavy rains came, it looked like a swamp. The kids at Lauderdale Lakes' Boyd Anderson High School, 82 percent black, would wade through calf-deep water to reach more than a score of vintage-1959 portable classrooms.

The exterior walls of the portables were stained and rotting. Inside many, leaky roofs had rippled carpets, causing a tripping hazard.

Ray de la Feuilliez, head of the district's facilities department, said the portables were OK. "Learning goes on here," he said.

Sixteen-year-old Sheena Banton, president of the sophomore class, begged to differ.

"These portables are awful. The school is falling apart. The bathrooms are atrocious. The doors are broken, the sinks clog up and overflow," Sheena said.

School Board member Miriam Oliphant paid a surprise visit to the school two weeks after The Herald asked her about the condition of the portables.

Her assessment: "Those portables were disgusting."

Boyd Anderson is in her district. Moreover, Oliphant is the point person for minority concerns -- she is the only black School Board member in a district where more than a third of the students are black.

At her insistence, the district immediately began fixing the portables and the school's main buildings. It took 132 work orders to itemize the problems, everything from broken windows and broken computers in the main building to leaky roofs, rotted siding, asbestos and termite infestation in the portables.

"I don't think this is representative of our 23 high schools," Petruzielo said when presented with photographs of the school.

'Absolutely Atrocious'

Complaints poured forth from Miramar students

Last spring, Petruzielo visited Miramar High during a student-for-a-day program. As reporters looked on, students bombarded him with complaints.

The gym floor was peeling so badly that other high schools refused to play basketball games at Miramar. The track was in such disrepair that the team hadn't hosted a meet in six years. Its Apple IIe computers, as slow and unadaptable as dinosaurs, were relics from the early 1980s, some of them with missing keys.

"It's absolutely atrocious," said Lorraine Auxilly, a Miramar parent who has a daughter at the school. "Apple IIe's, what can you do with them?" During his visit, Petruzielo said he was surprised and promised speedy repairs.

The gym floor and the track have been fixed.

Principal Ray Henderson has begun buying up-to-date computers with money he found in his budget by not hiring teachers. He took that step last year after thwarting a plan by the district to send hand-me-down computers from Nova High to Miramar High.

Oliphant says that's one school and one problem solved. But there are plenty more.

Not long ago, during a visit to predominantly black Northside Elementary in Fort Lauderdale, a school that dates back to 1927, she found a leaky ceiling in the cafeteria, a bucket amid the lunch tables collecting drips.

"I walked out and went and got the superintendent. I brought him back to see," she said.

With close to 200 schools to maintain, there are bound to be a handful of problems, Petruzielo says. But some School Board members insist the problem goes deeper.

"It's obvious to me the process is terribly broken somewhere," School Board member Lois Wexler said.

Oliphant has a solution: "Frank does not spend enough time in his schools. Maybe he should start having all his cabinet meetings out at the schools."

Beyond Aesthetics

Facilities often divide 'haves' from 'have-nots'

If he takes that advice, Petruzielo will find disparities that go beyond just aesthetics.

Two-year-old Flanagan High, in western Pembroke Pines, boasts two gymnasiums, an aerobics dance studio, a state-of-the-art recording studio and such architectural amenities as glass block that lets bright sunshine flood the band room.

Price tag: \$40 million, which touched off complaints.

"There will never be another Flanagan," says Petruzielo, vowing to take a no-frills approach with future high schools. Flanagan was in the works before he arrived in 1994.

Even schools built at the same time with the same design are markedly different.

Example: Miramar High, 59 percent black, and Coconut Creek High, 30 percent black, which opened a year apart in the early 1970s.

Coconut Creek was the first older school in the district to win a state grant to bring up-to-date technology into the school. The upgrade -- which includes rewiring and new computers -- has been delayed by a dispute with the contractor but should be finished by next school year.

Even without that, there are 200 Power Macs and Pentium-powered PCs -- high-end computers -- throughout the school. When the retrofitting project is finished, there will be more.

Miramar High has a computer lab -- part of a renovation in the early '90s -- but the district didn't provide computers. When Petruzielo visited, many students at the school had never used the Internet, had never seen the World Wide Web. Only one computer had on-line access -- and only because a teacher brought in a modem and America Online software from home.

``We'll certainly never make the old schools look as pretty as the new schools," Wexler said. ``But they should have the same equipment. There should be the same standards."

The School Board frequently points to Fort Lauderdale's Dillard High as a model black facility that has benefited from district dollars. But at meetings this month, parents and students peppered the district with complaints that the performing and visual arts magnet school is a mess, with cracked mirrors, broken ballet bars and an auditorium that leaks.

Just last week, the district shut down a commercial food preparation classroom for three days after finding conditions to be substandard.

Striving For Balance

Efforts include new and rebuilt schools

Broward has tried to bring some balance.

It was first in the state to replace old schools because they were obsolete. Eight predominantly black schools, among them Watkins Elementary, Lauderhill Paul Turner Elementary and New River Middle, have been rebuilt since 1987.

Millions have been spent putting magnet programs into black schools. But those programs were designed to draw white students into the inner city. Until a lawsuit two years ago, the majority of black students were shut out.

Students at low-achieving schools -- most of which are predominantly black -- get first crack at scarce summer-school seats. Those same schools benefit from the Alliance of Quality Schools, a program that brings in the equivalent of an academic SWAT team to improve performance.

But closing the gap between black and white facilities is a much greater challenge, Petruzielo said. The School Board has rejected several options that would have freed space in crowded western schools -- and dollars to rehab the east.

When Petruzielo arrived, he instituted a policy to force ``critically overcrowded" schools onto alternative schedules such as year-round calendars and split sessions that would have increased the schools' capacity.

The School Board failed to back his plan, caving in to pressure from parents and developers.

``It could have made a difference," Petruzielo said.

Wayne Alexander, a vice president of the Urban League of Broward County, says it's time to get tough.

``I came here from California, where I saw people fight tooth and nail against year-round schools, but they had to do it and people got used to it," he said.

Politics Plays Role

Not all of the schools that lag are black

The same political clout that kept schools off year-round calendars likely accounts for some of the disparities.

“It's become so political,” Oliphant said. “The wheel that squeaks the loudest gets the oil. The people out west have the power.”

Not all of the crumbling schools are black. Floranada Elementary, which is white, and South Broward High, which is integrated, are both in the east and both in bad shape.

South Broward, on Federal Highway in Hollywood, was built in 1948 and has torn carpeting, dented lockers, tarnished water fountains, ancient wiring and missing floor tiles. A ceiling tile once worked its way loose and bopped a math teacher on the head.

Petruzielo says it's up to the principals to make sure a school gets what it needs.

In some cases, a strong principal has made a difference. Earlean Smiley took over Ely High, one of the two traditionally black high schools from the days of official segregation, three years ago. Although it is far from a Flanagan -- the makeshift weight room is in the old auto shop, and the band room has water-stained walls and ceiling -- she has demanded and won renovations and new technology.

The superintendent says he has plans to give the principals help. Facility managers will be assigned a list of schools to inspect. The managers will be like roving troubleshooters, Petruzielo said.

Even if that narrows the gap, parents and principals say policies like the technology plan that allocates more computers to new schools will widen it.

To many who are critical of the district, it's the same story: Those with the least must wait the longest for less.

“The poorer schools get less resources,” said Alexander of the Urban League, “and that is the bottom line.”