



I advise and enjoin those who direct the paper in the tomorrows never to advocate any cause for personal profit or preferment. I would wish it always to be "the tocsin" and to devote itself to the policies of equality and justice to the underprivileged. If the paper should at any time be the voice of self-interest or become the spokesman of privilege or selfishness it would be untrue to its history.

— from the will of Josephus Daniels, Editor and Publisher 1894-1948

The diversity dilemma

Achieving racial diversity in public schools is too important — and too difficult — to leave to educators alone. Other community leaders can help by encouraging racially and economically diverse housing.

Time has done little to dampen the fervor that the subjects of school desegregation and mandatory busing inspire. But while racial fear and misunderstanding still play a part in that discussion, they no longer dominate it. Instead, the heat surrounding the issues arises from tension between the ideal of racial diversity in the schools and economic realities outside them. Efforts to address one without the other are likely to fail.

As a two-part N&O series last week-end pointed out, school districts across North Carolina are struggling to establish, or maintain, racial diversity as they cope with headlong growth. In counties such as Wake and Mecklenburg, where enrollments are climbing steadily, school officials have relied mainly on two approaches: enticing parents to send kids to schools outside their neighborhoods with specialized "magnet" programs, and busing students involuntarily to achieve racial balance.

Increasingly, neither parents nor educators are happy with those methods or their results. As population growth leads to construction of shiny new schools closer to home, the allure of magnet schools — despite the excellent results many have obtained — is wearing off. Many parents understandably resent their children's having to catch buses before sunrise for long rides to school. Further, a persistent gap in achievement between black and white students has many black parents, especially, wondering if all the hassle is worthwhile.

It's difficult not to sympathize with those parents, but it's also difficult to overestimate the importance of racial diversity in the schools. Achieving racial and economic balance is critical to

assuring that resources are divided equitably so all schools can offer comparable, high-quality educations. And if children don't learn to live and work with people of different colors and backgrounds, they'll have a harder time doing so as adults.

Educators are in a tough spot — admirably trying to stay true to the ideal of diversity while also responding to parents' complaints and court rulings. That pressure has spawned some creative ideas, including Charlotte-Mecklenburg school officials' proposal to give parents a choice of schools within local clusters. Wake school leaders plan to revitalize the magnet program and are experimenting with express bus routes so students spend less time in transit.

Those ideas sound promising but don't address the underlying problem of segregated housing patterns. Most neighborhoods remain largely or wholly segregated because — sadly — economic differences generally show a racial pattern: Wealthy neighborhoods tend to be predominantly white, and poor neighborhoods overwhelmingly are inhabited by people of color.

Accordingly, one way to ensure that schools reflect a healthy racial and economic mix might be to ensure first that neighborhoods do. That, of course, would take a community effort, with significant participation from county and municipal leaders. If land-use and zoning policies were adopted that promoted economically diverse neighborhoods, school populations would fall into line without all the awkward mechanisms now required.

The benefits of diversity extend far beyond the classroom. Efforts to achieve it should too.