

The Sociopolitical Context of Education in Post-Civil Rights Birmingham*

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Abstract

Drawing on scholarship from the politics and history of education, narrative and archival data, and the author's emic perspectives, this article examines social and political transformations in the Birmingham City Schools (BCS) and some of its surrounding metropolitan school districts during the pre- and post-classical phases of the American Civil Rights Movement. The BCS, in particular, has encountered a fate similar to urban districts across the U. S. South and nation, most notably, severe fiscal, social, and economic problems precipitated by historic racial inequities, the exodus of middle-class White and African American students and families to the surrounding suburbs, and increased enrollment of students who are socially and economically disenfranchised. Moreover, the district has been beset by inter- and intraracial school governance controversies and shrinking legal, political, and financial commitments from federal, state, and local governments. The question deliberated is whether or not post-civil rights Birmingham can reignite its renowned civic capacity, which is grounded in its historic role as a bastion of the civil rights movement, to address these pressing concerns. This question is considered in light of decidedly altered municipal and educational contexts that are more metropolitan, ethnically and linguistically diverse, and socioeconomically stratified.

The Sociopolitical Context of Education in Post-Civil Rights Birmingham

Observers acquainted with Birmingham, Alabama, typically have learned about the city through historical civil rights footage; most infamously, they see the images of former Public Safety Commissioner, Eugene “Bull” Connor’s incitement of vicious police dogs and powerful water hoses onto innocent, nonviolent protesters, many of whom were youth (Eskew, 1997; Garrow, 1989; McWhorter, 2001). Although this revealing yet narrow segment of Birmingham’s history receives repetitive coverage during the nation’s periodic reflections on its troubled racial past, very little is known about Birmingham’s educational history and its relationship to contemporary schooling (Loder-Jackson, 2011, 2012, in press). This is a curious oversight given that the historic struggles for civil and educational rights were so closely intertwined. The national fight for educational equity, which culminated legally in the landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* Supreme Court decision, set the stage for local civil rights leaders and citizens, most notably, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the families he enlisted as legal plaintiffs, to dismantle racial segregation in Birmingham’s public schools (Leech, September 17, 2010; Spencer, October 9, 2011; White & McManis, 2000). Yet, in the aftermath of the 50th anniversary of the watershed civil rights year in 2013, and the 60th commemoration of *Brown* in 2014, Birmingham’s contemporary educational context is more reflective of the Supreme Court’s *Plessy v. Ferguson* “separate but equal” mandate than of *Brown*’s deferred promise to supplant it.

In the sixty years since *Brown*, the Birmingham City Schools (BCS) have encountered the same fate as many urban schools across the United States: most notably, severe fiscal, social, and economic problems precipitated by historic racial inequities; the exodus of middle-class White and African American students and families to the surrounding suburbs; increased

enrollment of students who are socially and economically disenfranchised; inter- and intraracial school governance controversies; and shrinking legal, political, and financial commitments from federal, state, and local governments (Loder, 2006). These problems make good fodder for negatively slanted press coverage of the so-called urban school crisis (Miron, 1996). Similar to some large urban school districts in the Northeast and Midwest, the BCS recently underwent a state takeover followed by a looming threat of losing its accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) if fiscal and school board governance issues were not resolved (Leech, June 27, 2012, November 1, 2012). The district also recently completed a search for a new superintendent after its long-embattled superintendent resigned (Underwood, October 7, 2014, May 12, 2015). Birmingham school reformers are attempting to rekindle the grassroots momentum of yesteryear to address these contemporary problems. But this has proved difficult in decidedly altered municipal and educational contexts that are more metropolitan, ethnically and linguistically diverse, and economically polarizing than ever before.

A brief review of Birmingham's civil rights and educational history, and how this history is embedded within the sociopolitical context of urban schools, offers a useful framework for understanding this dilemma.¹ The subsequent analysis of local and national urban school contexts is considered in light of historical perspectives, changing racial and socioeconomic urban municipal demographics, and the shifting racial dynamics of urban school governance. Furthermore, this analysis addresses the context of the rising power of federal, state, and municipal executives in U. S. education evidenced most prominently in recent state and mayoral takeovers of large urban school districts.

A Brief History of Birmingham's Civil Rights and Public Education Struggles

Birmingham's history as one of the pivotal centers of the civil rights movement provides a unique context for examining contemporary civic capacity in urban schools. Given the recalcitrant and violent resistance of many White residents and municipal and school leaders prior to *Brown*, this Supreme Court decision quite plausibly would not have been enacted had it not been for the bravery and tenacity of a contingent of Birmingham's Black² citizenry. Court cases initiated by Shuttlesworth and his own young children, along with other families, were critical to chiseling the wall of segregation separating Black and White children (Eskew, 1997; Dolgin, Fryday & Helfand, 2011; Huntley & McKerley, 2009; McWhorter, 2001; Spencer, October 9, 2011; White & McManis, 2000). Shuttlesworth's organization, the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), comprised largely of pastors, church members, and local citizens, organized to fill the void of the state-banned NAACP. ACMHR was central to mobilizing grassroots community support for desegregation (Eskew, 1997; Spencer, October 9, 2011; White & McManis, 2000), as it petitioned the Birmingham Board of Education (BBOE) on August 21, 1957, to admit Black students to all-White schools. But the BBOE, backed by state sanctions, stonewalled Shuttlesworth and his supporters' efforts every step of the way. The Alabama state school superintendent reminded Shuttlesworth and his comrades that "the people of Alabama voted to change the Constitution of this State, and thereby abolished the right of education or training of any individual at public expense" (*Shuttlesworth et al. v. BBOE*). The superintendent went on to warn them: "I think you will destroy what you already have if you refuse to cooperate with the decision of the local school board of education to place your child in the school they think will be best for your child" (*Shuttlesworth et al. v. BBOE*).

On September 17, 1957 Birmingham's school and municipal officials contended with *Brown* head on when Shuttlesworth and his family joined ranks with other Black families in an

attempt to integrate the predominantly White Phillips High School. However, Shuttlesworth and his family paid a high price for their activism. They were attacked by an angry White mob, which left Shuttlesworth badly beaten, his wife stabbed, and his daughter with a broken ankle (Spencer, October 9, 2011). Yet this setback did not stop Shuttlesworth from issuing another petition the following month signed by 58 individuals and married couples. The petition again called for “the public schools of Birmingham, Alabama to be desegregated, and opened to all children without regard to race, creed, or color,” according to the *Brown I* and *II* (i.e., they desegregate “with all deliberate speed”) Supreme Court decisions. In response, the BBOE built new all-Black schools to thwart Shuttlesworth and local citizens’ attempts to enact *Brown* (Loder-Jackson, in press). It would not be until six years later, in 1963, that BCS were finally integrated. But the era of integration would prove to be short-lived, as the BCS underwent “de facto” resegregation between the late 1980s through the present, resulting from a combination of social and economic factors and government-sanctioned rezoning and school redistricting laws.

Birmingham School Governance’s Shifting Sociopolitical Dynamics

Historic Black School Board Majority

A closer examination of the shifting sociopolitical dynamics of school governance in Birmingham shortly after school desegregation reveals longstanding interracial conflicts and emergent intraracial fissures that have now become commonplace in the BCS. The first Black school board member, Clyde Kirby, who later served as board president, initially appeared in the group photograph of the BBOE’s published minutes on May 14, 1970. The second Black school board member and first female of her race, Ossie Ware Mitchell, first appeared in a BBOE group photograph on May 8, 1973. The third Black school board member, Louis Dale, who replaced Kirby after his untimely death from cancer, is first pictured in May 1979 (Dale & Loder-Jackson,

July 28, 2009). T. L. Alexander was the fourth Black school board member who served for several years alongside Mitchell and Dale. Two White female school board members, Martha Gaskins and Belle Stoddard, also served with Mitchell, Dale, and Alexander for at least one term. The school board members' voting patterns were sometimes, but not always, split along racial lines.

A few notable deliberations of the first Black-majority school board centered around naming schools after prominent Black community leaders (prior to then they had been named after deceased White segregation-era board members and citizens); strategizing to remove the district from a federal desegregation decree using magnet schools as an alternative to crosstown busing; concerns about efforts to lower testing benchmarks as the district became increasingly Black; and providing an equal educational opportunity for Black students to enroll in gifted education and honors programs. After much deliberation between the BBOE, its lawyers, and President Jimmy Carter's U. S. Justice Department concerning the federal desegregation decree, the school district was declared "unitary" (i.e., one racially-integrated district versus two racially-separated districts) in 1983 by the U. S. District Court, under the condition that it continue its same plans for integrating students and faculty as stipulated in the court order originating from the *Armstrong and U.S. vs. Board of Education of the City of Birmingham* case.

Controversies Surrounding First Black Superintendent

By far the most controversial issue that arose for this particular board, especially given its historic Black majority in relation to Birmingham's contentious civil rights history, was the firing of its first Black school superintendent, Walter Harris, in the late 1980s. Harris was hired in February 1984 to replace Wilmer Cody, who was the last in a long line of all-White superintendents and had departed for a superintendent role in Maryland. It was during Harris'

second year as superintendent that Dale posed a number of questions to him concerning declining test score data. In addition, other board members expressed concerns about teachers leaving the district for suburban schools.

There was a special meeting called on June 3, 1985 that did not include Harris. Several months later, the December 19, 1985 minutes stated that Harris submitted a resignation letter to the board. Dale asked a longtime Black school district administrator, John Cantelow, to serve as the interim superintendent until the board found a replacement for Harris. After news about the resignation letter got out to the community, there were two delegations, in particular, that rallied support around Harris: one led by Birmingham City Council president William Bell; and the other led by longtime civil rights activist, Reverend Abraham Woods (Alexander, Calhoun, Corley, Dale & Harrison & Loder-Jackson, May 3, 2013; Dale & Loder-Jackson, July 28, 2009). Woods attended the board meeting with a petition signed by community members calling for the BBOE to reinstate Harris. In response to pressure from these delegations, along with intervention from Mayor Richard Arrington directed to Dale (Dale & Loder-Jackson, July 28, 2009), the board voted to rescind its action and allow Harris to continue his contract for the next year. Interestingly, the vote was more of a default vote with the two White female members voting “no,” two of the three Black board members voting “yes,” and Dale abstaining. Dale admitted that Arrington influenced him to “change [his] vote, but not [his] mind” concerning Harris’ performance (Dale & Loder-Jackson, 2009). This tie resulted in the board accepting Harris’ resignation effective May 31, 1986, “or whenever he acquires a position, whichever comes first.” After Harris’ resignation, Dale called Cantelow back to serve as interim superintendent.

The board continued to face pressure from Woods’ Citizens Task Force. Arrington set up a mayoral task force of his own to make inquiries about the board’s decision. A second time, in

the face of mounting pressure, the board, led by its president, Dale, voted to extend an offer to Harris to serve as superintendent until June 15, 1987. In this instance, the two White female board members voted “nay” and the three Black board members voted “aye,” which reinstated Harris on July 22, 1986. However, the struggle between Dale and Harris continued, mainly around declining student achievement (Dale & Loder-Jackson, July 28, 2009). Harris eventually vacated the superintendent’s office at the end of his contract in the midst of intermittent community protests. Dale received the brunt of backlash from Harris’ supporters. Woods led protest marches on the University of Alabama at Birmingham’s campus where both Dale and a replacement school board member, Robert Corley, who is White, both worked as professors. Woods was also angry with Corley for delivering the swing vote that eventually permitted Harris’ contract to expire (Alexander et al. & Loder-Jackson, 2013). But criticism for Dale was especially harsh, including charges of being an “Uncle Tom,” and his receipt of human excrement by way of U.S. mail from an anonymous sender (Alexander et al. & Loder-Jackson, May 3, 2013; Dale & Loder-Jackson, July 28, 2009).

Calls for an Elected versus an Appointed Board

BBOE governance shifted from city council appointment to election in 2001. There are not any definitive public accounts of this shift, although some observers have speculated that the political fall-out surrounding the removal of the city’s first Black superintendent in 1987 set the stage for this change. Dale had stated emphatically in recent years that he believed he was responsible for precipitating a long series of events that led the Jefferson County delegation of the Alabama State Legislature to push for an elected board in 2001 (Dale & Loder-Jackson, July 28, 2009). He admitted that he tried to quell Woods’ concerns about losing the first African American superintendent by assuring him that a second and more capable one could be found.

The school board fulfilled this consideration with the appointment of the second Black superintendent, Cleveland Hammonds. But Dale's stance on Harris' performance and fate remained unshaken, citing that he did not think it was right to compromise Black student achievement for the symbolism of retaining the first Black superintendent (Alexander et al. & Loder-Jackson, May 3, 2013; Dale & Loder-Jackson, July 28, 2009).

Revolving Door of Superintendents

Since the Harris controversy nearly 30 years ago, the BCS has witnessed a revolving door of nine permanent or interim superintendents, virtually all of whom are African American: Cleveland Hammonds; Edward Lamonte (interim for a few months and the only White superintendent since Cody); Geraldine Bell (interim); Johnny Brown; Waymond Shivers; Stan Mims; Barbara Allen (interim); the recently departed superintendent, Craig Witherspoon; and Spencer Horn (interim). Each superintendent has had to contend with declining student achievement in an era of accountability, a steep decline in student enrollment, and in more recent years, severe budget cuts, which have resulted in staff cuts and school closings. Two superintendents, in particular, Johnny Brown and Craig Witherspoon, encountered problems with the teachers' union and school board around school staff reductions of a mostly African American workforce. Johnny Brown served between 1998 and 2002, and is credited with dramatically reducing the number of BCS schools that appeared on the ALSDE's failing school list from 74 to eight (Arrington, 2008; Bradley, 1999). However, he raised the ire of his predominantly African American teaching staff when he increased the salaries of central office administrators, some of whom received raises of \$20,000 a year, at a time when teachers received mere increases of one to one and one half percent (Bradley, 1999). He also had a contract on the table that would have boosted his compensation from \$151,000 to \$181,000 a

year, but the school board rescinded his contract in order to end a two-day teacher strike that kept more than 30,000 students home from school (Bradley, 1999). Still the mayor at that time, Arrington surmised that the powerful Alabama Education Association (AEA) teachers' union was the real culprit in ending Brown's tenure, which he viewed favorably (Arrington, 2008). Notably, it was during Brown's tenure that the campaign for an elected versus an appointed board mounted, largely with support from the AEA, local community activists, and the Jefferson County delegation of the Alabama State Legislature (Arrington, 2008; Reid, 2002). Arrington, at that time, warned that Birmingham's schools would go from bad to worse by switching from an appointed to an elected board (Arrington, 2008; Dean & Leech, April 8, 2012).

The National Urban School Context

New Problems for Pioneering Black Superintendents

Birmingham's shifting sociopolitical context in relation to municipal and school governance reflects national trends. Black Americans who pioneered urban municipal and school leadership in the aftermath of the civil rights era encountered a unique set of inter- and intraracial dynamics (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 1999; Scott, 1980). Newly minted Black school board members, superintendents, and principals confronted transformative social and political contexts that would in some ways make their jobs more difficult than they were for their predecessors during the Jim Crow era. Scott (1980) suggested that Black superintendents, in particular, might have been better off during the pre-*Brown* era. Prior to *Brown*, many Black school superintendents held positions in very small and predominantly rural school systems in the South and Southwest. These segregated rural school systems offered Black superintendents more promotional opportunities than did integrated urban school systems. In addition, Black superintendents were well-positioned to garner community support within the smaller, rural,

cohesive communities in their traditional geographical stronghold of the U. S. South. Scott (1980) forecasted that an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse and poor student population, declines in reading and math achievement test scores, and a lack of financial and material resources coupled with tenuous political clout would place Black superintendents in the post-civil rights era between a rock and a hard place politically. He surmised that on the one hand, they would be viewed as messiahs because Black community members would hold unrealistically high expectations that significant improvements in public education could be gained solely through the empowerment of Black school leaders and educators. On the other hand, Black superintendents would be distrusted by members of the Black community who would perceive them as official representatives of White middle-class-dominated school districts. In turn, White politicians and members of the business community would berate urban school leaders for failing schools and blame urban schools for proliferating societal ills.

Racial Cleavages in Black-Led Cities and Urban School Reform

Scott's (1980) prediction was underscored in Henig, Hula, Orr, and Pedescleaux's (1999) analysis of the role of race and politics in post-civil rights urban school district reform. While they acknowledged that urban schools in "black-led cities" encountered problems similar to schools in "white-led cities," they argued that race is particularly salient in understanding a city's capacity to garner necessary civic support for urban schools (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 1999, p. 7). The larger empirical question they posed was: "Why is meaningful school reform so elusive?" They concluded that race and politics are too often ignored by urban school reformers. In order for urban school reform to succeed, there must be a commitment to building civic capacity, which they defined as "the capacity collectively to set goals and effectively pursue them"; in turn, they argued that civic capacity calls for "exercising political leadership and

mastering political skills” (p. 9). Yet, too often, well-intentioned school reformers do not recognize or embrace the need for political mastery and cultural awareness in implementing reforms. Henig and his coauthors pointed out that the post-civil rights context of White family, business, and corporate flight coupled with an increasing influx of poor and racially and ethnically diverse individuals in cities and urban schools set the stage for a more polarizing, utilitarian, and strident political tenor. They reasoned that it would be difficult for school reformers to convince Whites (and some people of color) who had abandoned the cities to make an emotional and fiscal commitment to its welfare, particularly to that of urban schools.

Although they acknowledged some cities’ successes with securing White business and corporate support for downtown economic development, they deduced that rallying similar support for urban schools would not be as easy given the “redistributive” nature of school reform. Local government leaders during that time were politically wary about pushing initiatives perceived to benefit lower-income residents at the expense of higher-income residents. Henig and his coauthors concluded that “the white business community ... psychologically disengaged from the public school system once it became perceived as the responsibility of the black elected elite” (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 1999, p. 51). They also noted that some Black municipal leaders would forgo calls for racial solidarity in supporting urban public schools in favor of serving either their own or their designated electorate’s political interests.

Rising Prominence of “Boardroom Progressives” and Multilevel-Governmental Political Leaders in Urban School Reform

There are recent developments in urban school reform that have reversed the 1980s and 1990s defection and disengagement of the White business and corporate sector from Black-led cities. The emergence of “boardroom progressives” in the twenty-first century, referred to as

high-profile and well-resourced officers in major national foundations, corporate philanthropists, leaders of education nonprofits, school choice advocates, and nontraditional urban school superintendents, has dramatically changed the urban school reform landscape (Reckhow, 2013). Unlike their turn-of-the-twentieth century progressive reformer predecessors, today's boardroom progressives have been calling for more, not less government influence in urban school governance. Notably, over the past three decades, U.S. presidents, governors, and mayors have become increasingly visible and involved in educational policy and politics. For example, in the 1980s there was the rise of "the education governor" followed by the prominence of the "education president" in the late 1980s and early 1990s, both of whom elevated the salience of education during their political campaigns and tenures in office (Fuhrman, 1994; Henig, 2009; Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 2007). More recently, a switch to mayoral control of large urban school districts in cities such as Boston, Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC has empowered mayors to appoint nontraditional school superintendents from outside of the public education sector, who in some instances, have emerged as high-profile and often controversial boardroom progressives in their own right (Boyd, Kerchner, & Blyth, 2008; Gold, Henig, & Simon, 2011; Henig & Rich, 2004; Henig, 2009; Reckhow, 2013; Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 2007). However, some African Americans are skeptical about increasing levels of government executive control of urban public schools, citing concerns that it undermines the democratic process and usurps their hard-fought battle for local community control. Many African Americans who have been shut out of private sector jobs have found a sense of economic security, mission, and purpose in the public sector, and fear that the top-down reforms of urban mayors, in particular, threaten their livelihood (Gold, Henig, & Simon, 2011; Henig, 2009).

There are competing explanations for the increasing prominence of multi-level government executive involvement in local educational affairs, which range from situational and opportunistic to more complex, structural rationales (Henig, 2009). Henig (2009) introduced what he viewed as the most compelling of these explanations: an “end of educational exceptionalism and the incorporation of education policy into general purpose government” (pp. 296). He explained that early twentieth century progressive reformers fought hard to divorce public education from the political arena, e.g., calling for reforms in school governance that would transfer leadership and power from mayors to school boards. In turn, advocacy for creating separate funding sources for schools independent of other municipal budget items went hand-in-hand with these governance shifts. Over time, however, the political boundaries separating municipal and state governance and local public school governance have blurred, and consequently, education policy matters have been incorporated into broader municipal and state agendas (Henig, 2009; Reckhow, 2013; Stone, 2001).

This new political phenomenon of strong executive influence makes it easier for governors and mayors to encroach upon public school governance domains that previously have been somewhat off-limits. In recent years, governors, state education leaders, and mayors have been able to more readily make the case for “taking over” urban school districts dubbed as failures. State and mayoral takeovers of the daily operations of mostly large urban school districts in the Northeast, Mid-Atlantic, and Midwest regions have become more prevalent since the 1990s (Wong & Shen, 2003). These takeovers have produced mixed results in student achievement with some data favoring the effectiveness of mayoral over state intervention in local school board affairs (Wong & Shen, 2003; Wong, Shen, Anagnostopoulos, & Rutledge, 2007; Stover, 2007). Yet, in the case of mayoral control of schools, very often African American

residents, especially those employed in the public sector, find themselves on opposite sides of mayors and boardroom progressives who are pushing for change that threatens their livelihood as public school employees, and runs counter to what they deem best for their children and communities (Gold, Henig & Simon, 2011; Henig, 2009; Reckhow, 2013; Stone, 2001).

Much of the public discourse and research on state and mayoral takeovers have focused on regions beyond the U. S. South. However, there have been notable takeovers in U. S. Southern urban school districts as well. For example, the Alabama State Department of Education (ALSDE) has taken over large urban and metropolitan school districts such as the Jefferson County Schools. ALSDE has recently taken over the BCS due to school board governance and financial concerns. The next section provides context for understanding the long series of events that led to this takeover.

Birmingham's Changing Municipal and Educational Contexts

Similar to other U. S. metropolises, the BCS district is predominantly African American (96%) and low-income (nearly 90% on free and reduced lunch), yet surrounded by a suburban ring of middle- to upper-middle class, predominantly White, well-financed school districts (*Alabama's Education Report Card 2011-2012*; Anderson, April 8, 2004; Frankenberg, 2009; Lanahan and Weyburn, Spring 2013; Phi Delta Kappa International, 2011; Ray, December 14, 2007). The student population has steeply declined since the 1970's (from 70,000 to under 25,000) due to both White and African American middle class flight to the nearby suburban and county schools (Hansen, March 27, 2011; Hansen & Leech, August 6, 2006; Lanahan & Weyburn, Spring 2013; Phi Delta Kappa International, 2011). Notably, the Hispanic/Latino/a student population has increased although its percentage (2.7%) is still quite small compared to school district populations in the Southwest, Midwest, and Northeast (Phi Delta Kappa

International, 2011). This population was beset by the 2012 passage of Alabama's controversial immigration law, which required school districts to verify their students' citizenship status (Chandler, September 29, 2011, June 26, 2012). The BCS district's Hispanic/Latino/a population dipped tremendously after the law's implementation (Leech, October 12, 2011; Wolfson, February 10, 2012). After a flurry of multiracial coalition and governmental protests (Bryant, June 28, 2011; Leech, November 8, 2011; Velasco, June 25, 2011), and on the heels of the Supreme Court's immigration ruling in Arizona in 2012, which upheld a controversial provision allowing police to check the immigration status of people they detain and suspect are in the country illegally, but struck down a number of core provisions authorizing police to arrest immigrants without warrant, making it a state crime for undocumented immigrants to fail to carry registration papers and other government identification, and forbidding those unauthorized for employment in the United States to apply, perform, or solicit work, Alabama's immigration law was challenged in court by civil and legal rights organizations and eventually dismantled (Barnes, June 25, 2012; Chandler, June 26, 2012; Chapell, 2013, October 19; Cohen & Mears, June 26, 2012).

In spite of several appeals from a few White moderate political and civic leaders in the 1960s and 1970s to merge Birmingham and its surrounding suburbs, there has been a long-term trend toward predominantly White-suburban balkanization (Bryant, January 22, 2014; Connerly, 2005) and small Black-municipality annexation (Arrington, 2008). More recently, some metropolitan-area suburbs have been forming independent school districts by pulling away from Birmingham's county seat school district, the Jefferson County Schools (Frankenberg, 2009; Gray, January 22, 2014; McCarty, November 12, 2013), and even wealthier suburban/exurban counties such as Shelby County (Reed, January 24, 2014, September 10, 2013). The precipitous

decline in the BCS student population has resulted in several school closings and demolitions (Witherspoon, 2011), but not without protests from parents and community members lamenting lost ties to a bygone era and the exacerbation of urban blight in their neighborhoods (Stock, May 12, 2008). At the same time, some new school buildings have been erected from county sales tax revenues to house newly-merged student populations from closed schools.

The BCS district's demographics reflect the city's population. Birmingham's population is 73.4% African American and notably poor, with the latest statistics citing 28.9% of its residents living below the federal poverty line, a percentage that greatly exceeds both the state (18.1%) and national averages (14.9%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Likewise, the median household income for Birmingham residents (\$31, 467) is lower than both the state (\$43,160) and national (\$53,046) averages (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). In the five decades following the height of Birmingham's civil rights movement, African Americans have held high-profile offices such as mayor, city councilor, school district superintendent, and school board member. The BCS teaching staff of 1,500 is 79% African American and 81% female with 93% of these teachers meeting the federal designation of "highly qualified" under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Lanahan & Weyburn, Spring 2013). Notably, 61% of the district's teachers have a master's degree and 121 are National Board Certified (Lanahan & Weyburn, Spring 2013).

But the change in the complexion of municipal leadership and the teaching corps has not led to the transformation for which many residents had hoped. The local media has reported on the disenchantment of an African American middle class that has lost faith in the school system (Hanson & Leech, August 6, 2006). The "enemy" of African American progress in the post-civil rights era is no longer casted as the White racist municipal leadership and anti-integration protesters chanting, "2, 4, 6, 8, we don't want to integrate" (Williams, 1987). The new villain is

portrayed by the local media as well as some community members as ineffectual school officials that impede progress (Leech, August 21, 2010). The ALSDE's recent takeover of the BCS, coupled with a SACS probation and accreditation warning, has resulted in a firestorm of negative press, local-state governance conflicts, community turmoil, charges of state-led White paternalism and racism, and threats to deny reaccreditation if governance issues are not resolved soon (Leech, June 27, 2012, November 1, 2012; Whitmire, July 25, 2013).

Intraracial Clashes between the BCS Superintendent and School Board

The former BCS superintendent weathered a series of political storms, particularly with his initial school board, mainly due to his steep budget cuts, firing, demotions, and hiring of central office staff, and school closings (Dean & Leech, April 8, 2012). A former majority of five school board members (four of whom are African American, and one of whom is White, yet closely self-identifies with the African American community) conspired to fire him, and then sued him. This majority of five believed Witherspoon was doing the bidding of White business, corporate, and civic leaders as well as the ALSDE at the expense of the livelihoods of African American school personnel and the best interests of the community and students. A few African American residents expressed similar concerns, citing his strong support from Birmingham's "boardroom progressives," namely a biracial organization of business, corporate, and civic leaders from both within the Birmingham city limits and "over-the-Mountain," which is a local color moniker for independent, predominantly White middle-to-upper-class suburbs, several of which established their own school districts in the aftermath of school desegregation (Dean & Leech, April 8, 2012). Their highly publicized in-fighting instigated a state takeover and brought the district to the brink of losing its SACS accreditation (Leech, April 13, 2012; Whitmire, July 25, 2013). Some of the board members representing the majority of five sued the ALSDE for

violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, accusing the ALSDE of overriding the votes of elected board members in a majority African American school district (Leech, February 14, 2013). A collective of fired and demoted school district employees also sued ALSDE to win their jobs or former positions back, and were successful in their pursuit (Faulk, August 26, 2014).

In response to the contentious school board politics, Birmingham's voters revamped the majority of the board (Leech, October 22, 2013), returning only three former members who were not a part of the contentious majority of five. Currently, eight out of the nine board members are African American, which reflects a reduction of one White board member, who was a part of the former majority of five. The new board is somewhat multigenerational compared to previous boards, with three out of nine members who are in their early-to-mid 30s or appear to be several years younger than their fellow board members. One of these younger members was unanimously elected by his fellow board members as the new board president (Leech, October 23, 2013). In striking contrast to the previous board, at least in its early term, the new board is decidedly low-key in its deliberations and has garnered minimal negative press. The new board president has been featured favorably thus far in local media and magazine outlets. As a Morehouse College alumnus and lawyer, his brand of leadership reflects consensus-building and a willingness to listen to the community residents, including White business, corporate, and civic leaders. However, he has voiced publicly that he no longer wants the board to operate under direct state control (Crenshaw, August 27, 2013). The ALSDE has shown some signs that its direct oversight might end sooner than later as evidenced by its recent vacation of the state's oversight team from BBOE offices shortly after the new board's election (Leech, September 24, 2013). Student achievement, high school completion rates, and finances have improved markedly since the state takeover and school board elections, but the recent departure of the embattled

superintendent and the subsequent search for a new one stirred anxiety at a time when the district and its constituency were hoping for a rare period of stability (Madison, October 7, 2014).

However, the board's unanimous vote on May 12, 2015 to appoint the district's first non-interim female superintendent, Kelley Castlin-Gacutan, may be a positive sign for future board-superintendent relations (Underwood, 2015).

Besides the former superintendent's resignation, the board's most controversial foray to date is its endorsement of a cluster of schools in a predominantly low-income African American neighborhood to operate similarly to charter schools, although the state did not legally recognize charter schools until recently (Leech, January 14, 2014). The AEA teachers' union and some community leaders and residents have voiced concern and skepticism about this decision, especially given the context of long term gentrification in this neighborhood that preceded talks about creating "charter-like" schools (Underwood, April 2, 2013).

School Choice Reforms Realized

The school board's endorsement of a "charter-like" BCS feeder pattern zone should be examined in the context of recent state governance dynamics that have granted more control to conservative executive and legislative leaders who support school choice options. For two years, Republican leaders in the Alabama State Legislature attempted to pass charter school legislation to no avail (AL.com, Charter schools topics, <http://topics.al.com/tag/charter%20schools/index.html>). The AEA teachers' union was against it, and still wielded considerable power at that time. In addition, many Democratic state legislators, who received political support from AEA and African American constituencies, were reticent about supporting charter schools. However, the Republican-controlled majority of the state legislature recently passed the controversial Alabama Accountability Act (AAA), which grants

provisions for (a) flexibility in school district governance upon request and (b) students in schools labeled as failing to transfer to better-performing public and private schools at public taxpayer expense (*AL.com*, Alabama Accountability Act topics, <http://topics.al.com/tag/Alabama%20Accountability%20Act/posts.html>). Such reforms were unheard of in Alabama under the formerly Democratic-controlled state legislature and strong AEA teachers' union influence. But in recent years, powerful longtime AEA leaders have stepped down and been replaced by a new leader, who has already resigned from office, leaving the teachers' union politically impotent in a decidedly new conservative political context in both the executive and legislative branches of state government (Associated Press, March 31, 2015). In addition, national boardroom progressives have slowly but surely gained a foothold in Alabama's educational politics and policy context: most notably, former Washington DC Public Schools Chancellor, Michelle Rhee, and her brainchild organization, Students First (Carsen, February 8, 2012; Leech, January 7, 2013). Alabama's governor appointed a Students First staff person as one of his top educational consultants. Summarily, the convergence of a Republican-controlled state legislature, a Republican governor who is pro-school choice, national and local boardroom progressives' influence on urban school reform, and a fledgling AEA teachers' union have significantly altered both Alabama's and Birmingham's education policy and political landscapes. In turn, middle-class African American parents who are frustrated with urban schools have also looked more closely at school choice options. The convergence of these forces, no doubt, led to the state's first successful passage of a charter school law in March 2015 (Cason, 2015, March 22).

A New Coalition for Change in Birmingham?

Divided Loyalties

Recent school governance controversies and massive school personnel layoffs in Birmingham have brought to the surface divided loyalties between and among African American parents and community members on the one hand, and teachers' union leaders and their rank and file members on the other hand. Lingering intraracial tensions hinder coalition-building between and among African American school personnel and parents, all of whom are left behind to grapple with the fall-out of the post-*Brown* urban school context (Loder, 2006; Loder-Jackson, in press). As noted previously, modern-day foes of the BCS are no longer casted as White, racist anti-integrationists. Today they are portrayed as predominantly African American school board members and central office bureaucrats who impede progress. When school leaders threaten to close schools or are perceived to be jeopardizing student interests, parents show up in droves at BBOE and local district meetings to voice their concerns (Leech, April 6, 2012; Stock, May 12, 2008). However, when school personnel cuts are proposed, particularly in the central office, primarily teachers' unions and their constituents are left to fend for their own professional fates (Leech, July 24, 2012). Although, no doubt, many parents support and are happy with their children's teachers and administrators, they typically do not mobilize themselves to attend meetings to protest large-scale personnel cuts in the same way they do when proposals are on the table to close their children's neighborhood schools.

In modern-day Birmingham, rarely has there been a multigenerational and economically-diverse coalition of African American parents, community members, *and* educators advocating publicly and concertedly on behalf of public education (Loder-Jackson, in press). The dearth of large-scale coalition-building among contemporary African American educators, parents, and community members runs counter, historically, to the coalitions in Birmingham which fought for educational equity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The "disintegration" or "splintering

of Black America” is a particularly disconcerting fall-out of the post-integration era (Robinson, 2010, Title page).

I have been actively involved in a rare phenomenon of multiracial, metropolitan-wide, and economically diverse grassroots mobilization. In 2007, the Yes We Can! Birmingham (YWC!B) was spearheaded by a nonprofit organization along with local educational, civic, business, and community leaders to support the BCS (Rolen, February 10, 2008). Both YWC!B and its offshoot organization, the Birmingham Education Foundation (BEF), are deemed successful by some local leaders, yet it remains to be seen whether African American community members view them as a viable solution for problems plaguing the BCS. In a city with Birmingham’s unique civil rights history there is an inevitable tension between “community building” (e.g., YWC!B and BEF) versus “community organizing” strategies (e.g., conventional civil rights tactics that challenge power structures) to help transform socially, politically, and economically disenfranchised communities (Saegert, 2006). As I have noted previously some of Birmingham’s African American residents are leery of the implicit motives and agendas of local multiracial coalitions and community foundations that include White “over the Mountain” members, who wield considerable power and influence in local political, economic, and civic affairs (Loder-Jackson, Voltz & Froning, 2014; Loder-Jackson, in press). Some residents believe that these coalitions are really Trojan horses mounted to drive in a new wave of White control and power-brokering in the city’s schools as well as selected inner-city neighborhoods deemed profitable to long range downtown economic development, which is a view mirrored by residents in other post-civil rights cities in the U. S. South such as Charlotte, North Carolina (Smith, 2004). This view is prompting some residents, especially AEA teachers’ union members, to oppose the “quasi-chartering” of a cluster of BCS schools nested within a predominantly low-

income African American neighborhood that has witnessed pockets of gentrification in recent years. This gentrification has been spearheaded primarily by a coalition of predominantly White suburban megachurch members, a predominantly White-led nonprofit foundation, a few civic groups with predominantly White staffs and boards, along with some African American neighborhood business, education, and community leaders (Underwood, April 2, 2013).

Middle-Class Families' Urban Exodus and Emergent "Metropolitan" Civil Rights Battles

Another post-civil rights phenomenon that has changed the historic dynamics of grassroots civic capacity in Birmingham is the relatively recent exodus of middle-class African American families to the suburbs and their associated school districts. Many parents who have left the city cite their disenchantment with the schools as a major impetus for their departure (Hansen, March 27, 2011; Hansen & Leech, August 6, 2006). In response, there is an emergent African American pro-school choice organization in the state of Alabama that has been convening a number of town hall forums advocating for charter schools and the AAA (see Black Alliance for Educational Options, <http://www.baeo.org/>). Although some African American parents have expressed guilt about abandoning the BCS and leaving others to solve its problems, they have resolved that their children's best interests must come first. But as the U. S. Southern idiom goes, "You can run, but you can't hide." Some African American families have encountered concerns with racial and economic discrimination in their suburban communities as they confront issues such as new zoning regulations that re-route children residing in apartments to new schools to recalibrate scores at lower-performing schools, threats of bus transportation cancellation impacting predominantly students of color as well as low-income and working class White students and school transportation personnel, and the cessation of longstanding desegregation agreements that permitted their children to cross municipal lines to attend

suburban schools (Anderson, April 8, 2004; Carsen, August 12, 2013; Leech, September 17, 2013; Ray, December 14, 2007).

In response, parents who have made the transition from urban to suburban neighborhoods and schools are finding themselves engaged in modern-day civil rights battles reminiscent of the past (Orfield, 2014). A case in point is the Hoover City Schools (HCS). The city of Hoover is an increasingly multiracial, multiethnic, and socioeconomically diverse municipality adjacent to Birmingham. In fact, Birmingham and Hoover are sometimes linked by government websites and local chambers of commerce (i.e., “Birmingham-Hoover metropolitan area,” http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes_13820.htm). Between the 2007-2008 and 2012-2013 academic terms, HCS student enrollment increased by 10%, which reflected a 42% increase in its African American enrollment and a 28% increase in its Hispanic/Latino/a enrollment (Leech, September 17, 2013). Many of these students, along with White students from low-income, working class, and two-parent working families, rely on the bus for transportation. HCS lost a major revenue stream from its city government and is grappling to make up the loss. The first and most controversial of its proposals was to cut school bus service. The bus cut controversy prompted a multiracial coalition of parents and community supporters to join ranks with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to fight their cause (Anderson, November 12, 2013). To date, the HCS school board has backtracked on its plan for cuts and is deliberating alternatives, e.g., charging a rider’s fee.

Another issue that has emerged in HCS relates to low state standardized test scores at a select number of its schools that have a significant population of low-income, working class, and lower-middle income students of color, many of whom reside in apartment buildings (Anderson, September 28, 2014). The former superintendent’s plan to rezone these schools in a manner that

would result in more socioeconomic integration was met with strong resistance from several primarily White middle- and upper-class parents who did not want their children to travel a distance to attend schools outside of their neighborhoods. After the rezoning plan was tabled, faculty members at one of the elementary HCS lamented that some parents were pulling their children out of their school due to their fears about declining test scores although there is evidence of rebounding achievement (Anderson, February 10, 2015).

Concluding Thoughts

It is difficult to forecast what the future holds for the BCS and its surrounding metropolitan school districts, particularly in rapidly changing districts such as HCS. Not everyone agrees but diverse coalitions that cut across racial, ethnic, economic, geographic, and political lines appear to be crucial for enacting long-term changes in the Birmingham metropolitan area's decidedly altered municipal and educational contexts (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 1999; King & Caldwell, 2009; Loder-Jackson, Voltz, & Froning, 2014; Saegert, 2006; Stone, 2001). Teachers' unions, school personnel, and elected board members, in particular, must be careful not to isolate themselves from newly-configured coalitions that include casts of characters with whom they are skeptical, namely White business, corporate, and civic leaders who live "over the Mountain." Conversely, White "over the Mountain" leaders and residents dare not sweep under the rug the city's infamous racial history and its long-term implications for undermining successful interracial coalition-building. Furthermore, elected African American leaders (and White public officials who self-identify with African American communities) must recognize that many voters in their electorates are sophisticated enough to discern when they are acting on their own versus their constituents' (especially schoolchildren's)

best interests. In other words, they cannot continue to fall back on innocuous calls for acquiescent racial solidarity and loyalty that thinly veil their self-interests and personal agendas.

On the municipal front, predominantly White “social entrepreneurs” who have a vested interest in revitalizing neglected inner-cities must go beyond the powerbrokers in City Hall and into local neighborhoods to consider how they can work *with* and not *around* long-time residents and neighborhood leaders to improve their environs. In addition, they must be willing to first acknowledge, and then commit themselves to the painstaking work of addressing head on the inequitable power relations and poverty divide that persist between middle-to-upper class White suburban and upscale urban residents (and to a certain degree, middle-to-upper class African Americans) and low-income and working class African American (and a small but increasing number of Hispanic/Latino/a) urban residents. In turn, parents with children in urban and suburban schools who are being denied an equitable education must consider how they can join ranks across municipal lines to support their common causes.

Building civic capacity among school district personnel, parents, community members, and civic, business, and corporate groups appears to be the key to success for recent urban school reform initiatives (Henig, Hula, Orr & Pedescleaux, 1999; King & Caldwell, 2009; Stone, 2001; Tough, 2008). However, this is a tall order in post-civil rights cities in the U. S. South still haunted by the ghosts of their infamous racial pasts (Loder-Jackson, Voltz & Froning, 2014). Ultimately, it will require much personal and collective soul-searching, a willingness to commit for the long haul, some equitable compromise between top-down and bottom-up leadership approaches, and considerable risk-taking to forge new coalitions for public education’s transformation in the twenty-first century.

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¹ The discussion of the BBOE's history is based on data collected from the Birmingham (Ala.) Public Library's Government Documents department and the author's extensive narrative study of Birmingham educators born during the pre-civil rights, civil rights, and post-civil rights movement eras. The "civil rights movement" in the context of this article is understood to be the classical mid-20th century phase of what some historians refer to as a long civil rights movement that spanned as far back as the 19th century and endured through the 1970s and 1980s. The methodology for this study is described in detail in some of the author's previous and forthcoming publications (Loder-Jackson, 2011, 2012, in press).

² The racial/ethnic descriptors "Black" and "African American" are referenced interchangeably during historical periods when they were more commonly used in the American public discourse.