

# The Civil Rights Project

## *Proyecto Derechos Civiles*



### **For Immediate Release**

## School Resegregation and Civil Rights Challenges for the Obama Administration: A New Report from the Civil Rights Project at UCLA

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Los Angeles—January 14, 2009—As the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday and the Inauguration of this nation's first African American President approach, the nation is in a celebratory mood about progress on race relations. The election of Barack Obama is a breakthrough that would have been unimaginable a half century ago and a triumph of the long movement for racial justice. But a new report from the Civil Rights Project, *Reviving the Goal of an Integrated Society: A 21<sup>st</sup> Century Challenge*, points out that it would be wrong to assume that our nation has now realized Dr. King's dream and created a society where race no longer matters. In fact, the report concludes the opposite: the U.S. continues to move backward toward increasing minority segregation in highly unequal schools; the job situation remains especially bleak for American blacks, and Latinos have a college completion rate that is shockingly low. At the same time, very little is being done to address large scale challenges such as continuing discrimination in the housing and home finance markets, among other differences across racial lines.

The report's author, Professor Gary Orfield, commented, "It would be a tragedy if the country assumed from the Obama election that the problems of race have been solved, when many inequalities are actually deepening. The lesson to take from this is that we have elected a brilliant president, who is the product of excellent integrated schools and colleges. We should work hard to extend such opportunities to and develop the talents of the millions of blacks and Latinos who still face isolation and denial of an equal chance. The outgoing administration has left the machinery of civil rights justice and educational equity in a shambles and strong leadership will be needed to restore it."

For more than a decade, the Civil Rights Project has been issuing regular reports on the nation's progress in realizing the goal of the *Brown* decision and the historic 1964 Civil Rights Act—the aim that the nation end separate but unequal education and create schools that are integrated and successful for all children. Very large progress was made during the civil rights era but it is slipping away year by year. Since the Supreme Court reversed course in 1991 and authorized return to segregated neighborhood schools, there has been an increase in segregation every year, particularly for black and Latino students. The report shows that 40% of Latinos and 39% of blacks now attend intensely segregated

schools. The average black and Latino student is now in a school that has nearly 60% of students from families who are near or below the poverty line. These doubly segregated schools by race and poverty have weaker teaching forces, much more student instability, more students who come to school not speaking English and many other characteristics related to family and neighborhood poverty and isolation that make for challenging educational environments. These are the schools where much of the nation's dropout crisis is concentrated. More than 40 years after passage of the Fair Housing Act, there continues to be almost no serious enforcement against widespread housing discrimination, which impacts the segregation in districts with neighborhood school policies, and is making it difficult to maintain integration in suburbia.

The country has experienced a large increase in students attending multiracial schools, defined here as schools with more than a tenth of students from each of three or more racial groups. These are schools that can either be integrated across racial and class lines or schools that combine three highly impoverished communities of different racial backgrounds. They offer both challenges and possibilities, but almost no attention is being paid to studying them or to developing curriculum and training to help realize their possibilities. The substantial increase of whites attending multiracial schools—the percentage of white students in such schools has doubled in less than two decades— may well be one of the reasons why whites tend to believe that progress is being made on integration even as segregation deepens, on average, for black and Latino students.

The report also indicates that the frontier of racial change and school resegregation is now in the suburbs, where about a third of black and Latino students attend school. Even though there is a large white majority in suburban schools, two million black and Latino suburban students currently attend highly segregated schools. By contrast, only 2% of suburban white students attend these same segregated minority schools, while a majority attends suburban schools with at least 80% of white students. After two decades of a hostile Supreme Court and two terms of a presidency committed to reversing civil rights gains, only the nation's small towns and rural areas retain substantially integrated schools.

The report concludes that efforts to make separate schools equal, which have been the dominant approach since the federal government abandoned significant positive support for integration almost three decades ago, have failed. This failure includes No Child Left Behind, which was supposed to quickly equalize achievement across racial lines but has fallen far short. Instead, it is sanctioning scores of segregated minority schools without providing them enough help to make a difference. The report notes that too often the high hopes accompanying a racial change in leadership—when, for example, black or Latino mayors and school superintendents were first appointed--were often disappointed since the underlying racial barriers to opportunity were not addressed. Orfield, the report's author, calls on the incoming Obama Administration to "make the first serious commitment since President Johnson's Administration and build successfully integrated communities and schools wherever there are feasible opportunities." The report includes a discussion of a number of possible tools and techniques with the potential to extend past successes. Finally, the report calls on the new administration and Congress to review the evidence and provide the needed leadership, for example, to support integrated communities and to avoid the large-scale ghettoization of suburbia.

### **About the Civil Rights Project at UCLA**

Founded in 1996 by former Harvard professors Gary Orfield and Christopher Edley Jr., the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles is now co-directed by Orfield and Patricia Gándara, professors at UCLA. Its mission is to create a new generation of research in social science and law on the critical issues of civil rights and equal opportunity for racial and ethnic groups in the United States. It has commissioned more than 400 studies, published 13 books and issued numerous reports from authors at universities and research centers across the country. The Supreme Court, in its 2003 *Grutter v. Bollinger* decision, cited the Civil Rights Project's research. The CRP's Initiative on School Integration, which conducted this research, is made possible with the support of the Open Society Institute and the Ford Foundation.

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