

FEATURE

Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City

How one school became a battleground over which children benefit from a separate and unequal system.

By Nikole Hannah-Jones

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In the spring of 2014, when our daughter, Najya, was turning 4, my husband and I found ourselves facing our toughest decision since becoming parents. We live in Bedford-Stuyvesant, a low-income, heavily black, rapidly gentrifying neighborhood of brownstones in central Brooklyn. The nearby public schools are named after people intended to evoke black uplift, like Marcus Garvey, a prominent black nationalist in the 1920s, and Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Month, but the schools are a disturbing reflection of New York City's stark racial and socioeconomic divisions. In one of the most diverse cities in the world, the children who attend these schools learn in classrooms where all of their classmates — and I mean, in most cases, every single one — are black and Latino, and nearly every student is poor. Not surprisingly, the test scores of most of Bed-Stuy's schools reflect the marginalization of their students.

I didn't know any of our middle-class neighbors, black or white, who sent their children to one of these schools. They had managed to secure seats in the more diverse and economically advantaged magnet schools or gifted-and-talented programs outside our area, or opted to pay hefty tuition to progressive but largely white private institutions. I knew this because from the moment we arrived in New York with our 1-year-old, we had many conversations about where we would, should and definitely should not send our daughter to school when the time came.

My husband, Faraji, and I wanted to send our daughter to public school. Faraji, the oldest child in a military family, went to public schools that served Army bases both in America and abroad. As a result, he had a highly unusual experience for a black American child: He never attended a segregated public school a day of his life. He can now walk into any room and instantly start a conversation with the people there, whether they are young mothers gathered at a housing-project tenants' meeting or executives eating from small plates at a ritzy cocktail reception.

I grew up in Waterloo, Iowa, on the wrong side of the river that divided white from black, opportunity from struggle, and started my education in a low-income school that my mother says was distressingly chaotic. I don't recall it being bad, but I do remember just one white child in my first-grade class, though there may have been more. That summer, my mom and dad enrolled my older sister and me in the school district's voluntary desegregation program, which allowed some black kids to leave their neighborhood schools for whiter, more well off ones on the west side of town. This was 1982, nearly three decades after the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate schools for black and white children were unconstitutional, and near the height of desegregation in this country. My parents chose one of the whitest, richest schools, thinking it would provide the best opportunities for us. Starting in second grade, I rode the bus an hour each morning across town to the "best" public school my town had to offer, Kingsley Elementary, where I was among the tiny number of working-class children and the even tinier number of black children. We did not walk to school or get dropped off by our parents on their way to work. We showed up in a yellow bus, visitors in someone else's neighborhood, and were whisked back across the bridge each day as soon as the bell rang.

I remember those years as emotionally and socially fraught, but also as academically stimulating and world-expanding. Aside from the rigorous classes and quality instruction I received, this was the first time I'd shared dinners in the homes of kids whose parents were doctors and lawyers and scientists. My mom was a probation officer, and my dad drove a bus, and most of my family members on both sides worked in factories or meatpacking plants or did other manual labor. I understood, even then, in a way both intuitive and defensive, that my school friends' parents weren't better than my neighborhood friends' parents, who worked hard every day at hourly jobs. But this exposure helped me imagine possibilities, a course for myself that I had not considered before.

It's hard to say where any one person would have ended up if a single circumstance were different; our life trajectories are shaped by so many external and internal factors. But I have no doubt my parents' decision to pull me out of my segregated neighborhood school made the possibility of my getting from there to here — staff writer for The New York Times Magazine — more likely.

Integration was transformative for my husband and me. Yet the idea of placing our daughter in one of the small number of integrated schools troubled me. These schools are disproportionately white and serve the middle and upper middle classes, with a smattering of poor black and Latino students to create "diversity."

In a city where white children are only 15 percent of the more than one million public-school students, half of them are clustered in just 11 percent of the schools, which not coincidentally include many of the city's top performers. Part of what makes those schools desirable to white parents, aside from the academics, is that they have some students of color, but not too many. This carefully curated integration, the

kind that allows many white parents to boast that their children's public schools look like the United Nations, comes at a steep cost for the rest of the city's black and Latino children.

The New York City public-school system is 41 percent Latino, 27 percent black and 16 percent Asian. Three-quarters of all students are low-income. In 2014, the Civil Rights Project at the University of California, Los Angeles, released a report showing that New York City public schools are among the most segregated in the country. Black and Latino children here have become increasingly isolated, with 85 percent of black students and 75 percent of Latino students attending "intensely" segregated schools — schools that are less than 10 percent white.

This is not just New York's problem. I've spent much of my career as a reporter chronicling rampant school segregation in every region of the country, and the ways that segregated schools harm black and Latino children. One study published in 2009 in *The Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* showed that the academic achievement gap for black children increased as they spent time in segregated schools. Schools with large numbers of black and Latino kids are less likely to have experienced teachers, advanced courses, instructional materials and adequate facilities, according to the United States Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Most black and Latino students today are segregated by both race and class, a combination that wreaks havoc on the learning environment. Research stretching back 50 years shows that the socioeconomic makeup of a school can play a larger role in achievement than the poverty of an individual student's family. Getting Najya into one of the disproportionately white schools in the city felt like accepting the inevitability of this two-tiered system: one set of schools with excellent resources for white kids and some black and Latino middle-class kids, a second set of underresourced schools for the rest of the city's black and Latino kids.

When the New York City Public Schools catalog arrived in the mail one day that spring, with information about Mayor Bill de Blasio's new universal prekindergarten program, I told Faraji that I wanted to enroll Najya in a segregated, low-income school. Faraji's eyes widened as I explained that if we removed Najya, whose name we chose because it means "liberated" and "free" in Swahili, from the experience of most black and Latino children, we would be part of the problem. Saying my child deserved access to "good" public schools felt like implying that children in "bad" schools deserved the schools they got, too. I understood that so much of school segregation is structural — a result of decades of housing discrimination, of political calculations and the machinations of policy makers, of simple inertia. But I also believed that it is the choices of individual parents that uphold the system, and I was determined not to do what I'd seen so many others do when their values about integration collided with the reality of where to send their own children to school.

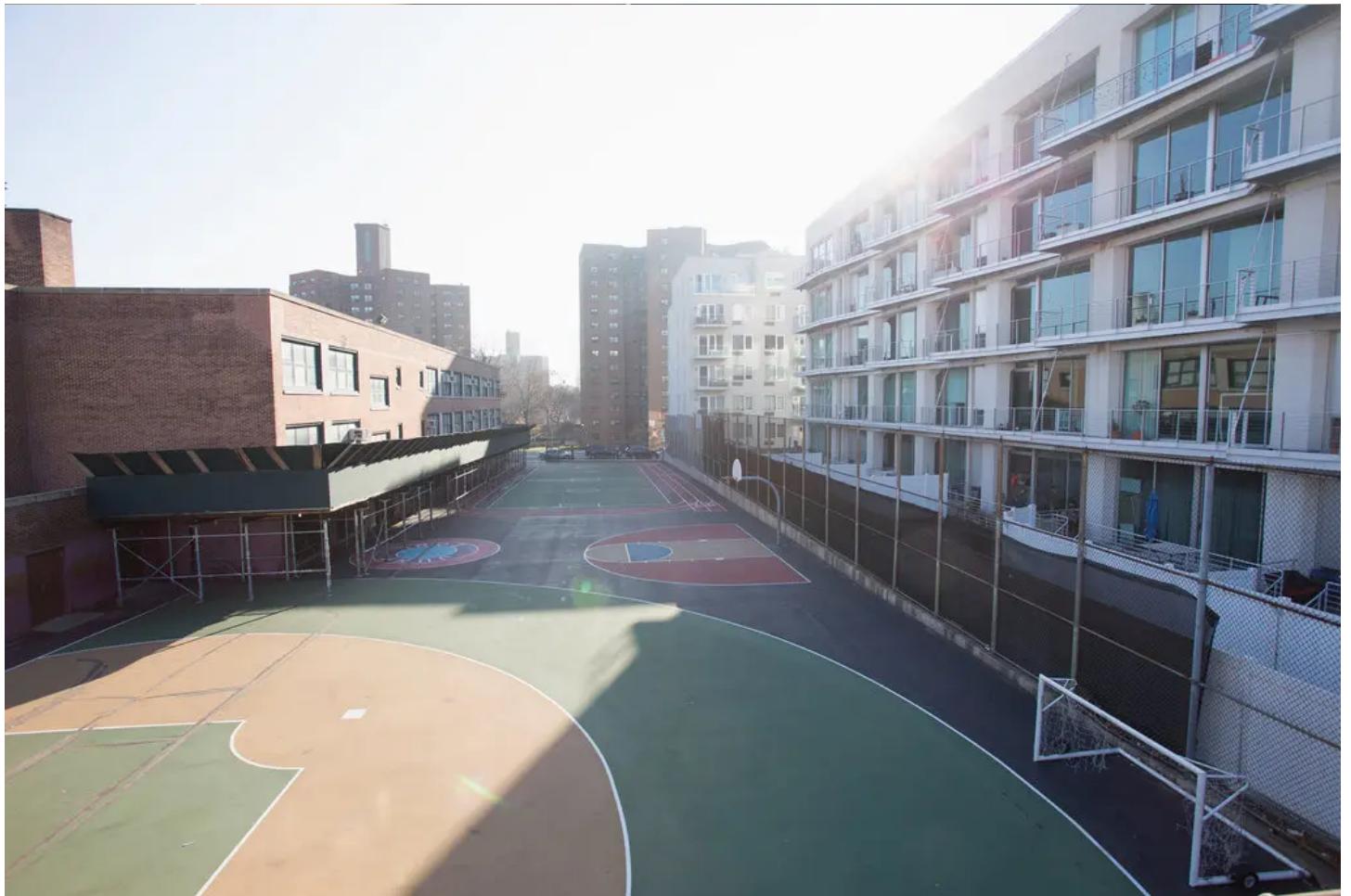
One family, or even a few families, cannot transform a segregated school, but if none of us were willing to go into them, nothing would change. Putting our child into a segregated school would not integrate it racially, but we are middle-class and would, at least, help to integrate it economically. As a reporter, I'd witnessed how the presence of even a handful of middle-class families made it less likely that a school would be neglected. I also knew that we would be able to make up for Najya anything the school was lacking.

As I told Faraji my plan, he slowly shook his head no. He wanted to look into parochial schools, or one of the "good" public schools, or even private schools. So we argued, pleading our cases from the living room, up the steps to our office lined with books on slavery and civil rights, and back down, before we came to an impasse and retreated to our respective corners. There is nothing harder than navigating our nation's racial legacy in this country, and the problem was that we each knew the other was right and wrong at the same time. Faraji couldn't believe that I was asking him to expose our child to the type of education that the two of us had managed to avoid. He worried that we would be hurting Najya if we put her in a high-poverty, all-black school. "Are we experimenting with our child based on our idealism about public schools?" he asked. "Are we putting her at a disadvantage?"

At the heart of Faraji's concern was a fear that grips black families like ours. We each came from working-class roots, fought our way into the middle class and had no family wealth or safety net to fall back on. Faraji believed that our gains were too tenuous to risk putting our child in anything but a top-notch school. And he was right to be worried. In 2014, the Brookings Institution found that black children are particularly vulnerable to downward mobility — nearly seven of 10 black children born into middle-income families don't maintain that income level as adults. There was no margin for error, and we had to use our relative status to fight to give Najya every advantage. Hadn't we worked hard, he asked, frustration building in his voice, precisely so that she would not have to go to the types of schools that trapped so many black children?

Eventually I persuaded him to visit a few schools with me. Before work, we peered into the classrooms of three neighborhood schools, and a fourth, Public School 307, located in the Vinegar Hill section of Brooklyn, near the East River waterfront and a few miles from our home. P.S. 307's attendance zone was drawn snugly around five of the 10 buildings that make up the Farragut Houses, a public-housing project with 3,200 residents across from the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The school's population was 91 percent black and Latino. Nine of 10 students met federal poverty standards. But what went on inside the school was unlike what goes on in most schools serving the city's poorest children. This was in large part because of the efforts of a remarkable principal, Roberta Davenport. She grew up in Farragut, and her younger siblings attended P.S. 307. She became principal five decades later in 2003, to a low-performing school. Davenport commuted from Connecticut, but her car was usually the first one in the parking lot each morning, often because she worked so late into the night that, exhausted, she would sleep at a friend's nearby instead of making the long drive home. Soft of voice but steely in character, she rejected the spare educational orthodoxy often reserved for poor black and brown children that strips away everything that makes school joyous in order to focus solely on improving test scores. These children from the projects learned Mandarin, took violin lessons and played chess. Thanks to her hard work, the school had recently received money from a federal magnet grant, which funded a science, engineering and technology program aimed at drawing middle-class children from outside its attendance zone.

Faraji and I walked the bright halls of P.S. 307, taking in the reptiles in the science room and the students learning piano during music class. The walls were papered with the precocious musings of elementary children. While touring the schools, Faraji later told me, he started feeling guilty about his instinct to keep Najya out of them. Were these children, he asked himself, worthy of any less than his own child? “These are kids who look like you,” he told me. “Kids like the ones you grew up with. I was being very selfish about it, thinking: I am going to get mine for my child, and that’s it. And I am ashamed of that.”



P.S. 307 (left) and luxury apartments, with the Farragut Houses in the background. Tobias Hutzler for The New York Times

When it was time to submit our school choices to the city, we put down all four of the schools we visited. In May 2014, we learned Najya had gotten into our first choice, P.S. 307. We were excited but also nervous. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t feel pulled in the way other parents with options feel pulled. I had moments when I couldn’t ignore the nagging fear that in my quest for fairness, I was being unfair to my own daughter. I worried — I worry still — about whether I made the right decision for our little girl. But I knew I made the just one.

For many white Americans, millions of black and Latino children attending segregated schools may seem like a throwback to another era, a problem we solved long ago. And legally, we did. In 1954, the Supreme Court issued its landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, striking down laws that forced black and white children to attend separate schools. But while *Brown v. Board* targeted segregation by state law, we have proved largely unwilling to address segregation that is maintained by other means, resulting from the nation’s long and racist history.

In the Supreme Court’s decision, the justices responded unanimously to a group of five cases, including that of Linda Brown, a black 8-year-old who was not allowed to go to her white neighborhood school in Topeka, Kan., but was made to ride a bus to a black school much farther away. The court determined that separate schools, even if they had similar resources, were “inherently” — by their nature — unequal, causing profound damage to the children who attended them and hobbling their ability to live as full citizens of their country. The court’s decision hinged on sociological research, including a key study by the psychologists Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps Clark, a husband-and-wife team who gave black children in segregated schools in the North and the South black and white dolls and asked questions about how they perceived them. Most students described the white dolls as good and smart and the black dolls as bad and stupid. (The Clarks also found that segregation hurt white children’s development.) Chief Justice Earl Warren felt so passionate about the issue that he read the court’s opinion aloud: “Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other ‘tangible’ factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does.”

The ruling made clear that because this nation was founded on a racial caste system, black children would never become equals as long as they were separated from white children.

In New York City, home to the largest black population in the country, the decision was celebrated by many liberals as the final strike against school segregation in the “backward” South. But Kenneth Clark, the first black person to earn a doctorate in psychology at Columbia University and to hold a permanent professorship at City College of New York, was quick to dismiss Northern righteousness on race matters. At a meeting of the Urban League around the time of the decision, he charged that though New York had no law requiring segregation, it intentionally separated its students by assigning them to schools based on their race or building schools deep in segregated neighborhoods. In many cases, Clark said, black children were attending schools that were worse than those attended by their black counterparts in the South.

Clark’s words shamed proudly progressive white New Yorkers and embarrassed those overseeing the nation’s largest school system. The New York City Board of Education released a forceful statement promising to integrate its schools: “Segregated, racially homogeneous schools damage the personality of minority-group children. These schools decrease their motivation and thus impair their ability to learn. White children are also damaged. Public education in a racially homogeneous setting is socially unrealistic and blocks the attainment of the goals of democratic education, whether this segregation occurs by law or by fact.” The head of the Board of Education undertook an investigation in 1955 that confirmed the widespread separation of black and Puerto Rican children in dilapidated buildings with the least-experienced and least-qualified teachers. Their schools were so overcrowded that some black children went to school for only part of the day to give others a turn.

The Board of Education appointed a commission to develop a citywide integration plan. But when school officials took some token steps, they faced a wave of white opposition. “It was most intense in the white neighborhoods closest to African-American neighborhoods, because they were the ones most likely to be affected by desegregation plans,” says Thomas Sugrue, a historian at New York University and the author of “Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North.” By the mid-’60s, there were few signs of integration in New York’s schools. In fact, the number of segregated junior-high schools in the city had quadrupled by 1964. That February, civil rights leaders called for a major one-day boycott of the New York City schools. Some 460,000 black and Puerto Rican students stayed home to protest their segregation. It was the largest demonstration for civil rights in the nation’s history. But the boycott upset many white liberals, who thought it was too aggressive, and as thousands of white families fled to the suburbs, the integration campaign collapsed.

Even as New York City was ending its only significant effort to desegregate, the Supreme Court was expanding the Brown ruling. Beginning in the mid-’60s, the court handed down a series of decisions that determined that not only did *Brown v. Board* allow the use of race to remedy the effects of long-segregated schools, it also *required* it. Assigning black students to white schools and vice versa was necessary to destroy a system built on racism — even if white families didn’t like it. “All things being equal, with no history of discrimination, it might well be desirable to assign pupils to schools nearest their homes,” the court wrote in its 1971 ruling in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, which upheld busing to desegregate schools in Charlotte, N.C. “But all things are not equal in a system that has been deliberately constructed and maintained to enforce racial segregation. The remedy for such segregation may be administratively awkward, inconvenient and even bizarre in some situations, and may impose burdens on some; but all awkwardness and inconvenience cannot be avoided.”

In what would be an extremely rare and fleeting moment in American history, all three branches of the federal government aligned on the issue. Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, pushed by President Lyndon B. Johnson, which prohibited segregated lunch counters, buses and parks and allowed the Department of Justice for the first time to sue school districts to force integration. It also gave the government the power to withhold federal funds if the districts did not comply. By 1973, 91 percent of black children in the former Confederate and border states attended school with white children.

But while Northern congressmen embraced efforts to force integration in the South, some balked at efforts to desegregate their own schools. They tucked a passage into the 1964 Civil Rights Act aiming to limit school desegregation in the North by prohibiting school systems from assigning students to schools in order to integrate them unless ordered to do so by a court. Because Northern officials often practiced segregation without the cover of law, it was far less likely that judges would find them in violation of the Constitution.

Not long after, the nation began its retreat from integration. Richard Nixon was elected president in 1968, with the help of a coalition of white voters who opposed integration in housing and schools. He appointed four conservative justices to the Supreme Court and set the stage for a profound legal shift. Since 1974, when the *Milliken v. Bradley* decision struck down a lower court’s order for a metro-area-wide desegregation program between nearly all-black Detroit city schools and the white suburbs surrounding the city, a series of major Supreme Court rulings on school desegregation have limited the reach of Brown.

When Ronald Reagan became president in 1981, he promoted the notion that using race to integrate schools was just as bad as using race to segregate them. He urged the nation to focus on improving segregated schools by holding them to strict standards, a tacit return to the “separate but equal” doctrine that was roundly rejected in Brown. His administration emphasized that busing and other desegregation programs discriminated against white students. Reagan eliminated federal dollars earmarked to help desegregation and pushed to end hundreds of school-desegregation court orders.

Yet this was the very period when the benefits of integration were becoming most apparent. By 1988, a year after Faraji and I entered

middle school, school integration in the United States had reached its peak and the achievement gap between black and white students was at its lowest point since the government began collecting data. The difference in black and white reading scores fell to half what it was in 1971, according to data from the National Center for Education Statistics. (As schools have since resegregated, the test-score gap has only grown.) The improvements for black children did not come at the cost of white children. As black test scores rose, so did white ones.

Decades of studies have affirmed integration's power. A 2010 study released by the Century Foundation found that when children in public housing in Montgomery County, Md., enrolled in middle-class schools, the differences between their scores and those of their wealthier classmates decreased by half in math and a third in reading, and they pulled significantly ahead of their counterparts in poor schools. In fact, integration changes the entire trajectory of black students' lives. A 2015 longitudinal study by the economist Rucker Johnson at the University of California, Berkeley, followed black adults who had attended desegregated schools and showed that these adults, when compared with their counterparts or even their own siblings in segregated schools, were less likely to be poor, suffer health problems and go to jail, and more likely to go to college and reside in integrated neighborhoods. They even lived longer. Critically, these benefits were passed on to their children, while the children of adults who went to segregated schools were more likely to perform poorly in school or drop out.

But integration as a constitutional mandate, as justice for black and Latino children, as a moral righting of past wrongs, is no longer our country's stated goal. The Supreme Court has effectively sided with Reagan, requiring strict legal colorblindness even if it leaves segregation intact, and even striking down desegregation programs that ensured integration for thousands of black students if a single white child did not get into her school of choice. The most recent example was a 2007 case that came to be known as *Parents Involved*. White parents in Seattle and Jefferson County, Kentucky, challenged voluntary integration programs, claiming the districts discriminated against white children by considering race as a factor in apportioning students among schools in order to keep them racially balanced. Five conservative justices struck down these integration plans. In 1968, the court ruled in *Green v. County School Board of New Kent County* that we should no longer look across a city and see a "white" school and a "Negro" school, but just schools." In 2007, Chief Justice John Roberts Jr. wrote: "Before Brown, schoolchildren were told where they could and could not go to school based on the color of their skin. The school districts in these cases have not carried the heavy burden of demonstrating that we should allow this once again — even for very different reasons. ... The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race."

Legally and culturally, we've come to accept segregation once again. Today, across the country, black children are more segregated than they have been at any point in nearly half a century. Except for a few remaining court-ordered desegregation programs, intentional integration almost never occurs unless it's in the interests of white students. This is even the case in New York City, under the stewardship of Mayor de Blasio, who campaigned by highlighting the city's racial and economic inequality. De Blasio and his schools chancellor, Carmen Fariña, have acknowledged that they don't believe their job is to force school integration. "I want to see diversity in schools organically," Fariña said at a town-hall meeting in Lower Manhattan in February. "I don't want to see mandates." The shift in language that trades the word "integration" for "diversity" is critical. Here in this city, as in many, diversity functions as a boutique offering for the children of the privileged but does little to ensure quality education for poor black and Latino children.

"The moral vision behind *Brown v. Board of Education* is dead," Ritchie Torres, a city councilman who represents the Bronx and has been pushing the city to address school segregation, told me. Integration, he says, is seen as "something that would be nice to have but not something we need to create a more equitable society. At the same time, we have an intensely segregated school system that is denying a generation of kids of color a fighting chance at a decent life."



Najya Hannah-Jones (center background, in blue shirt and headband) in her kindergarten class at P.S. 307 in Brooklyn. Glenna Gordon for The New York Times

Najya, of course, had no idea about any of this. She just knew she loved P.S. 307, waking up each morning excited to head to her pre-K class, where her two best friends were a little black girl named Imani from Farragut and a little white boy named Sam, one of a handful of white pre-K students at the school, with whom we car-pooled from our neighborhood. Four excellent teachers, all of them of color, guided Najya and her classmates with a professionalism and affection that belied the school's dismal test scores. Faraji and I threw ourselves into the school, joining the parent-teacher association and the school's leadership team, attending assemblies and chaperoning field trips. We found ourselves relieved at how well things were going. Internally, I started to exhale.

But in the spring of 2015, as Najya's first year was nearing its end, we read in the news that another elementary school, P.S. 8, less than a mile from P.S. 307 in affluent Brooklyn Heights, was plagued by overcrowding. Some students zoned for that school might be rerouted to ours. This made geographic sense. P.S. 8's zone was expansive, stretching across Brooklyn Heights under the Manhattan bridge to the Dumbo neighborhood and Vinegar Hill, the neighborhood around P.S. 307. P.S. 8's lines were drawn when most of the development there consisted of factories and warehouses. But gentrification overtook Dumbo, which hugs the East River and provides breathtaking views of the skyline and a quick commute to Manhattan. The largely upper-middle-class and white and Asian children living directly across the street from P.S. 307 were zoned to the heavily white P.S. 8.

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To accommodate the surging population, P.S. 8 had turned its drama and dance rooms into general classrooms and cut its pre-K, but it still had to place up to 28 kids in each class. Meanwhile, P.S. 307 sat at the center of the neighborhood population boom, half empty. Its attendance zone included only the Farragut Houses and was one of the tiniest in the city. Because Farragut residents were aging, with dwindling numbers of school-age children, P.S. 307 was underenrolled.

In early spring 2015, the city's Department of Education sent out notices telling 50 families that had applied to kindergarten at P.S. 8 that

their children would be placed on the waiting list and instead guaranteed admission to P.S. 307. Distraught parents dashed off letters to school administrators and to their elected officials. They pleaded their case to the press. “We bought a home here, and one of the main reasons was because it was known that kindergarten admissions [at P.S. 8] were pretty much guaranteed,” one parent told The New York Post, adding that he wouldn’t send his child to P.S. 307. Another parent whose twins had secured coveted spots made the objections to P.S. 307 more plain: “I would be concerned about safety,” he said. “I don’t hear good things about that school.”

That May, as I sat at a meeting that P.S. 8 parents arranged with school officials, I was struck by the sheer power these parents had drawn into that auditorium. This meeting about the overcrowding at P.S. 8, which involved 50 children in a system of more than one million, had summoned a state senator, a state assemblywoman, a City Council member, the city comptroller and the staff members of several other elected officials. It had rarely been clearer to me how segregation and integration, at their core, are about power and who gets access to it. As the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in 1967: “I cannot see how the Negro will totally be liberated from the crushing weight of poor education, squalid housing and economic strangulation until he is integrated, with power, into every level of American life.”

As the politicians looked on, two white fathers gave an impassioned PowerPoint presentation in which they asked the Department of Education to place more children into already-teeming classrooms rather than send kids zoned to P.S. 8 to P.S. 307. Another speaker, whose child had been wait-listed, choked up as he talked about having to break it to his kindergarten-age son that he would not be able to go to school with the children with whom he’d shared play dates and Sunday dinners. “We haven’t told him yet” that he didn’t get into P.S. 8, the father said, as eyes in the crowd grew misty. “We hope to never have to tell him.”

The meeting was emotional and at times angry, with parents shouting out their anxieties about safety and low test scores at P.S. 307. But the concerns they voiced may have also masked something else. While suburban parents, who are mostly white, say they are selecting schools based on test scores, the racial makeup of a school actually plays a larger role in their school decisions, according to a 2009 study published in *The American Journal of Education*. Amy Stuart Wells, a professor of sociology and education at Columbia University’s Teachers College, found the same thing when she studied how white parents choose schools in New York City. “In a post-racial era, we don’t have to say it’s about race or the color of the kids in the building,” Wells told me. “We can concentrate poverty and kids of color and then fail to provide the resources to support and sustain those schools, and then we can see a school full of black kids and then say, ‘Oh, look at their test scores.’ It’s all very tidy now, this whole system.”

I left that meeting upset about how P.S. 307 had been characterized, but I didn’t give it much thought again until the end of summer, when Najya was about to start kindergarten. I heard that the community education council was holding a meeting to discuss a potential rezoning of P.S. 8 and P.S. 307. The council, an elected group that oversees 28 public schools in District 13, including P.S. 8 and P.S. 307, is responsible for approving zoning decisions. School was still out for the summer, and almost no P.S. 307 parents knew plans were underway that could affect them. At the meeting, two men from the school system’s Office of District Planning projected a rezoning map onto a screen. The plan would split the P.S. 8 zone roughly in half, divided by the Brooklyn Bridge. It would turn P.S. 8 into the exclusive neighborhood school for Brooklyn Heights and reroute Dumbo and Vinegar Hill students to P.S. 307. A tall, white man with brown hair that flopped over his forehead said he was from Concord Village, a complex that should have fallen on the 307 side of the line. He thanked the council for producing a plan that reflected his neighbors’ concerns by keeping his complex in the P.S. 8 zone. It became clear that while parents in Farragut, Dumbo and Vinegar Hill had not even known about the rezoning plan, some residents had organized and lobbied to influence how the lines were drawn.



The writer attending a meeting at which a New York City community education council voted on the rezoning of P.S. 307 and P.S. 8. Glenna Gordon for The New York Times

The officials presented the rezoning plan, which would affect incoming kindergartners, as beneficial to everyone. If the children in the part of the zone newly assigned to P.S. 307 enrolled at the school, P.S. 8’s overcrowding would be relieved at least temporarily. And P.S. 307, the officials’ presentation showed, would fill its empty seats with white children and give all the school’s students that most elusive thing:

integration.

It was hard not to be skeptical about the department's plan. New York, like many deeply segregated cities, has a terrible track record of maintaining racial balance in formerly underenrolled segregated schools once white families come in. Schools like P.S. 321 in Brooklyn's Park Slope neighborhood and the Academy of Arts and Letters in Fort Greene tend to go through a brief period of transitional integration, in which significant numbers of white students enroll, and then the numbers of Latino and black students dwindle. In fact, that's exactly what happened at P.S. 8.

A decade ago, P.S. 8 was P.S. 307's mirror image. Predominantly filled with low-income black and Latino students from surrounding neighborhoods, P.S. 8, with its low test scores and low enrollment, languished amid a community of affluence because white parents in the neighborhood refused to send their children there. A group of parents worked hard with school administrators to turn the school around, writing grants to start programs for art and other enrichment activities. Then more white and Asian parents started to enroll their children. One of them was David Goldsmith, who later became president of the community education council tasked with considering the rezoning of P.S. 8 and P.S. 307. Goldsmith is white and, at the time, lived in Vinegar Hill with his Filipino wife and their daughter.

As P.S. 8 improved, more and more white families from Brooklyn Heights, Dumbo and Vinegar Hill enrolled their children, and the classrooms in the lower grades became majority white. The whitening of the school had unintended consequences. Some of the black and Latino parents whose children had been in the school from the beginning felt as if they were being marginalized. The white parents were able to raise large sums at fund-raisers and could be dismissive of the much smaller fund-raising efforts that had come before. Then, Goldsmith says, the new parents started seeking to separate their children from their poorer classmates. "There were kids in the school that were really high-risk kids, kids who were homeless, living in temporary shelters, you know, poverty can be really brutal," Goldsmith says. "The school was really committed to helping all children, but we had white middle-class parents saying, 'I don't want my child in the same class with the kid who has emotional issues.'"

The parents who had helped build P.S. 8, black, Latino, white and Asian, feared they were losing something important, a truly diverse school that nurtured its neediest students, where families held equal value no matter the size of their paychecks. They asked for a plan to help the school maintain its black and Latino population by setting aside a percentage of seats for low-income children, but they didn't get approval.

P.S. 8's transformation to a school where only one in four students are black or Latino and only 14 percent are low-income began during the administration of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, known for its indifference toward efforts to integrate schools. But integration advocates say that they've also been deeply disappointed by the de Blasio administration's stance on the issue. In October 2014, after the release of the U.C.L.A. study pointing to the extreme segregation in the city's schools, and nearly a year after de Blasio was elected, Councilmen Ritchie Torres and Brad Lander moved to force the administration to address segregation, introducing what became the School Diversity Accountability Act, which would require the Department of Education to release school-segregation figures and report what it was doing to alleviate the problem. "It was always right in front of our faces," says Lander, a representative from Brooklyn, whose own children attend heavily white public schools. "Then the U.C.L.A. report hit, and the segregation in the city became urgent."

The same month that Lander and Torres introduced the bill, Fariña, the schools chancellor, took questions at a town-hall-style meeting for area schools held at P.S. 307. A group of four women, two white, two black, walked to the microphone to address Fariña. They said that they were parents in heavily gentrified Park Slope, and that Fariña's administration had been ignoring their calls to help their school retain its diminishing black and Latino populations by implementing a policy to set aside seats for low-income children. Fariña, a diminutive woman with a no-nonsense attitude, responded by acknowledging that there "are no easy answers" to the problem of segregation, and warned that there were "federal guidelines" limiting "what we can do around diversity." What Fariña was referring to is unclear. While the Supreme Court's 2007 ruling in *Parents Involved* tossed out integration plans that took into account the race of individual students, the court has never taken issue with using students' socioeconomic status for creating or preserving integration, which is what these parents were seeking. In addition, the Obama administration released guidelines in 2011 that explicitly outlined the ways school systems could legally use race to integrate schools. Those include drawing a school's attendance zone around black and white neighborhoods.

At another town-hall meeting in Manhattan last October, Fariña said, "You don't need to have diversity within one building." Instead, she suggested that poor students in segregated schools could be pen pals and share resources with students in wealthier, integrated public schools. "We adopt schools from China, Korea or wherever," Fariña told the room of parents. "Why not in our own neighborhoods?" Integration advocates lambasted her for what they considered a callous portrayal of integration as nothing more than a cultural exchange. "Fariña's silly pen-pal comment shows how desensitized we've become," Torres told me. "It could be that the political establishment is willfully blind to the impact of racial segregation and has led themselves to believe that we can close the achievement gap without desegregating our school system. At worst it's a lie; at best it's a delusion." He continued, "The scandal is not that we are failing to achieve diversity. The scandal is we are not even trying."

Fariña would only talk to me for 15 minutes by phone. She told me in May that her pen-pal comments had been taken out of context. "If you hear any of my public speeches, this has always been a priority of mine," she said. "Diversity of all types has always been a priority." She went on to talk about the city's special programs for autistic students and about how Japanese students have benefited from the expansion of dual-language programs. But Asian-American students are already the group most integrated with white students. When pressed about integration specifically for black and Latino students, Fariña said the city has been working to support schools that are seeking more diversity and mentioned a socioeconomic integration pilot program at seven schools. "I do believe New York City is making strides. It is a

major focus going forward.”

On May 30, four days after our interview, the Department of Education said in an article in The Daily News that it was starting a voluntary systemwide “Diversity in Admissions” program and would be requesting proposals from principals. In 2014, several principals said they had submitted integration proposals and had not gotten any response from Fariña.

The announcement of the new initiative caught both principals and parents by surprise. Jill Bloomberg, principal at Brooklyn’s Park Slope Collegiate, which teaches sixth through 12th grade, says she learned about the initiative from the news article but otherwise had heard nothing about it, even though the deadline to submit proposals is July 8, about a month away. “I am eager for some official notification for exactly what the program is,” she told me.

David Goldsmith, who has been working on desegregation efforts as a member of the community education council, says he found the initiative, its timing and the short deadline for submitting proposals “puzzling.” “We could be very cynical and say, ‘They are not serious,’ ” he says.

Last June, de Blasio signed the School Diversity Accountability Act into law. But the law mandates only that the Department of Education report segregation numbers, not that it do anything to integrate schools. De Blasio declined to be interviewed, but when asked at a news conference in November why the city did not at least do what it could to redraw attendance lines, he defended the property rights of affluent parents who buy into neighborhoods to secure entry into heavily white schools. “You have to also respect families who have made a decision to live in a certain area,” he said, because families have “made massive life decisions and investments because of which school their kid would go to.” The mayor suggested there was little he could do because school segregation simply was a reflection of New York’s stark housing segregation, entrenched by decades of discriminatory local and federal policy. “This is the history of America,” he said.

Of course, de Blasio is right: Housing segregation and school segregation have always been entwined in America. But the opportunity to buy into “good” neighborhoods with “good” schools that de Blasio wants to protect has never been equally available to all.

To best understand how so many poor black and Latino children end up in neglected schools, and why so many white families have the money to buy into neighborhoods with the best schools, you need to look no further than the history of the Farragut Houses and P.S. 307. Looking at P.S. 307 today, you might find it hard to imagine that the school did not start out segregated. The low-slung brick elementary school, which opened in 1964, and the Farragut public-housing projects right outside its front doors once stood as hopeful, integrated islands in a city fractured by strict color lines in both its neighborhoods and its schools.

The 10 Farragut buildings, spread across roughly 18 acres, opened in 1952 as part of a scramble to house returning G.I.s and their families after World War II. When the first tenants moved in, the sprawling campus — named for David Farragut, an admiral of the United States Navy — was considered a model of progressive working-class housing, with its open green spaces, elevators, modern heating plant, laundry and community center.

In 1952, a black woman named Gladys McBeth became one of Farragut’s earliest tenants. Nearly three generations later, when I visited her in November, she was living in the same 14th-floor apartment, where she paid about \$1,000 a month in rent. Back then, she said, Farragut was a place for strivers. “I didn’t know nothing about projects when I moved in,” she said. “It was veteran housing.” The project housed roughly even numbers of black and white tenants, including migrants escaping hardship from Poland, Puerto Rico and Italy, and from the feudal American South. To get in, everyone had to show proof of marriage, a husband’s military-discharge papers and pay stubs.

Robert McBeth, Gladys’s husband, drove a truck, while she stayed home raising their four children. In the years before the Brown decision, the oldest of the McBeth children went to a nearby school where the kids were predominantly black and Latino, because the New York City Board of Education bused white children in the area to other schools, according to the N.A.A.C.P. School officials at the time, as today, claimed the racial makeup of the schools was an inevitable result of residential segregation. Though Farragut was not yet segregated, most of the city was. And that segregation in housing often resulted from legal and open discrimination that was encouraged and condoned by the state, and at times required by the federal government.

Nowhere would that become more evident than in Farragut, which by the 1960s was careening toward the same fate overtaking nearly all public housing in big cities. White residents used Federal Housing Administration-insured loans to buy their way out of the projects and to move to shiny new middle-class subdivisions. This subsidized home-buying boom led to one of the broadest expansions of the American middle class ever, almost exclusively to the benefit of white families. The F.H.A.’s explicitly racist underwriting standards, which rated black and integrated neighborhoods as uninsurable, made federally insured home loans largely unavailable to black home seekers. Ninety-eight percent of these loans made between 1934 and 1968 went to white Americans.

Housing discrimination was legal until 1968. Even if black Americans managed to secure home loans, many homes were off-limits, either because they had provisions in their deeds prohibiting their sale to black buyers or because entire communities — including publicly subsidized middle-class developments like Levittown on Long Island and Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan — barred black home buyers and tenants outright. The McBaths tried to buy a house, but like so many of Farragut’s black tenants, they were not able to. They continued to rent while many of their white neighbors bought homes and built wealth. Scholars attribute a large part of the yawning wealth gap between black and white Americans — the typical white person has 13 times the wealth of a typical black person — to discriminatory housing policies.

But before Farragut's white tenants left, parents of all colors sent their children to P.S. 307. Gladys McBeth, who died in May, sent her youngest child across the street to P.S. 307 and worked there as a school aide for 23 years. "It was one of the best schools in the district," she reminisced, sitting in a worn paisley chair. But by 1972, Farragut was more than 80 percent black, and to fill the vacant units and house the city's growing indigent population, the city changed the guideline for income and work requirements, turning the projects from largely working-class to low-income.

At some point, P.S. 307's attendance zone was redrawn to include only the Farragut Houses, ensuring the students would be black, Latino and poor. The New York City Department of Education does not keep attendance data before 2000, but as McBeth remembered it, by the late '80s, P.S. 307 was also almost entirely black and Latino. McBeth, who sent all four of her children to college, shook her head. "It all changed."

P.S. 307 was a very different place from what it had been, but Najya was thriving. I watched as she and her classmates went from struggling to sound out three-letter words to reading entire books. She would surprise me in the car rides after school with her discussions of hypotheses and photosynthesis, words we hadn't taught her. And there was something almost breathtaking about witnessing an auditorium full of mostly low-income black and Latino children confidently singing in Mandarin and beating Chinese drums as they performed a fan dance to celebrate the Lunar New Year.

But I also knew how fragile success at a school like P.S. 307 could be. The few segregated, high-poverty schools we hold up as exceptions are almost always headed by a singular principal like Roberta Davenport. But relying on one dynamic leader is a precarious means of ensuring a quality education. With all the resources Davenport was able to draw to the school, P.S. 307's test scores still dropped this year. The school suffers from the same chronic absenteeism that plagues other schools with large numbers of low-income families. And then Davenport retired last summer, just as the clashes over P.S. 307's integration were heating up, causing alarm among parents.



Students walking through a hallway at P.S. 307. Glenna Gordon for The New York Times

Najya and the other children at P.S. 307 were unaware of the turmoil and the battle lines adults were drawing outside the school's doors. Faraji, my husband, had been elected co-president of P.S. 307's P.T.A. along with Benjamin Greene, another black middle-class parent from Bed-Stuy, who also serves on the community education council. As the potential for rezoning loomed over the school, they were forced to turn their attention from fund-raising and planning events to working to prevent the city's plan from ultimately creating another mostly white school.

It was important to them that Farragut residents, who were largely unaware of the process, had a say over what happened. Faraji and I had found it hard to bridge the class divides between the Farragut families and the middle-class black families, like ours, from outside the neighborhood. We parents were all cordial toward one another. Outside the school, though, we mostly went our separate ways. But after the rezoning was proposed, Faraji and Benjamin worked with the Rev. Dr. Mark V. C. Taylor of the Church of the Open Door, which sits on the Farragut property, and canvassed the projects to talk to parents and inform them of the city's proposal. Not one P.S. 307 parent they spoke to knew anything about the plan, and they were immediately worried and fearful about what it would mean for their children. P.S. 307 was that rare example of a well-resourced segregated school, and these parents knew it.

The Farragut parents were also angry and hurt over how their school and their children had been talked about in public meetings and the press. Some white Dumbo parents had told Davenport that they'd be willing to enroll their children only if she agreed to put the new students all together in their own classroom. Farragut parents feared their children would be marginalized. If the school eventually filled up with children from high-income white families — the median income for Dumbo and Vinegar Hill residents is almost 10 times that of Farragut residents — the character of the school could change, and as had happened at other schools like P.S. 8, the results might not benefit the black and Latino students. Among other things, P.S. 307 might no longer qualify for federal funds for special programming, like free after-school care, to help low-income families.

"I don't have a problem with people coming in," Saaiba Coles, a Farragut mother with two children at P.S. 307, told those gathered at a community meeting about the rezoning. "I just don't want them to forget about the kids that were already here." Faraji and Benjamin collected and delivered to the education council a petition with more than 400 signatures of Farragut residents supporting the rezoning, but only under certain conditions, including that half of all the seats at P.S. 307 would be guaranteed for low-income children. That would ensure that the school remained truly integrated and that new higher-income parents would have to share power in deciding the direction of the school.

In January of this year, the education council held a meeting to vote on the rezoning. Nearly four dozen Farragut residents who'd taken two buses chartered by the church filed into the auditorium of a Brooklyn elementary school, sitting behind a cluster of anxious parents from Dumbo. Reporters lined up alongside them. In the months since the potential rezoning plan was announced, the spectacle of an integration fight in the progressive bastion of Brooklyn had attracted media attention. Coverage appeared in The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and on WNYC. "Brooklyn hipsters fight school desegregation," the news site Raw Story proclaimed. The meeting lasted more than three hours as parents spoke passionately, imploring the council to delay the vote so that the two communities could try to get to know each other and figure out how they could bridge their economic, racial and cultural divides. Both Dumbo and Farragut parents asked the district for leadership, fearing integration that was not intentionally planned would fail.

In the end, the council proceeded with the vote, approving the rezoning with a 50 percent low-income set-aside, but children living in P.S. 307's attendance zone would receive priority. But that's not a guarantee. White children under the age of 5 outnumber black and Latino children of the same age in the new zone, according to census data. And the white population will only grow as new developments go on the market. Without holding seats for low-income children, it's not certain the school will achieve 50 percent low-income enrollment.

David Goldsmith, president of the council, told me he didn't believe that creating low-income set-asides in only one school made sense; he is working to create a plan that would try to integrate the schools in the entire district that includes P.S. 8 and P.S. 307. But Benjamin Greene, who voted against the rezoning because it did not guarantee that half of the seats would remain for low-income children, said: "We cannot sit around and wait until somebody decides on this wonderful formula districtwide. We have to preserve these schools one at a time."

In voting for the rezoning, the council touted its bravery and boldness in choosing integration in a system that seemed opposed to it. "With the eyes of the nation upon us," Goldsmith began. "Voting 'yes' means we refuse to be victims of the past. We are ready to do this. The time is now. We owe this to our children."

But the decision felt more like a victory for the status quo. This rezoning did not occur because it was in the best interests of P.S. 307's black and Latino children, but because it served the interests of the wealthy, white parents of Brooklyn Heights. P.S. 8 will only get whiter and more exclusive: The council failed to mention at the meeting that the plan would send future students from the only three Farragut buildings that had been zoned for P.S. 8 to P.S. 307, ultimately removing almost all the low-income students from P.S. 8 and turning it into one of the most affluent schools in the city. The Department of Education projects that within six years, P.S. 8 could be three-quarters white in a school system where only one-seventh of the kids are white.

P.S. 307 may eventually look similar. Without seats guaranteed for low-income children, and with an increasing white population in the zone, the school may flip and become mostly white and overcrowded. Farragut parents worry that at that point, the project's children, like those at P.S. 8, could be zoned out of their own school. A decade from now, integration advocates could be lamenting how P.S. 307 went from nearly all black and Latino to being integrated for a period to heavily white.

That transition isn't going to happen immediately, so some Dumbo parents have threatened to move, or enroll their children in private schools. Others are struggling over what to do. By allowing such vast disparities between public schools — racially, socioeconomically and academically — this city has made integration the hardest choice.

"You're not living in Brooklyn if you don't want to have a diverse system around your kid," Michael Jones, who lives in Brooklyn Heights and considered sending his twins to P.S. 307 for pre-K because P.S. 8 no longer offered it, told me over coffee. "You want it to be

multicultural. You know, if you didn't want that, you'd be in private school, or you would be in a different area. So, we're all living in Brooklyn because we want that to be part of the upbringing. But you can understand how a parent might look at it and go, 'While I want diversity, I don't want profound imbalance.' " He thought about what it would have meant for his boys to be among the few middle-class children in P.S. 307. "We could look at it and see there is probably going to be a clash of some kind," he said. "My kid's not an experiment." In the end, he felt that he could not take a chance on his children's education and sent them to private preschool; they now go to P.S. 8.

This sense of helplessness in the face of such entrenched segregation is what makes so alluring the notion, embraced by liberals and conservatives, that we can address school inequality not with integration but by giving poor, segregated schools more resources and demanding of them more accountability. True integration, true equality, requires a surrendering of advantage, and when it comes to our own children, that can feel almost unnatural. Najya's first two years in public school helped me understand this better than I ever had before. Even Kenneth Clark, the psychologist whose research showed the debilitating effects of segregation on black children, chose not to enroll his children in the segregated schools he was fighting against. "My children," he said, "only have one life." But so do the children relegated to this city's segregated schools. They have only one life, too.