

# Let my People go

## ***When will Governor Murphy start dealing with School Segregation?***

Passover is the celebration of the Israelites freedom from bondage. It is also a story of triumph over an intransigent ruler who refused to listen until he was finally compelled by a power greater than his own.

Today in New Jersey, too many children of color suffer from another form of bondage. In a sermon delivered to a prominent synagogue in 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King called “racial segregation - a new form of slavery covered up with certain niceties...”. “Segregation”, he said, “is evil”, because “it relegates persons to the status of things.”

Last month, on the anniversary of Dr. King’s March to Montgomery, Alabama, nearly one hundred local community leaders, including parents, students, clergy, a rabbi, and NAACP leaders converged on the Atlantic County Democratic Party whose annual convention was being held in Somers Point, NJ. They called on party leaders to take a stand against school segregation and to deliver a message to New Jersey’s recalcitrant Democratic Governor. The response from the party chairman was to snub the civil rights marchers, bar them from entering the building and dispatch the local police to have them threatened with arrest. Fannie Lou Hamer and her Mississippi Freedom delegation was given better treatment here in 1964.

We are fortunate that Somers Point police acted professionally, and no one was hurt. But anyone who’s been remotely conscious over the past two years knows this could have ended in tragedy. To call armed police officers in a nearly all white town on a nearly all African American peaceful demonstration was stunningly irresponsible, potentially dangerous, and completely unwarranted. It reveals, however, the insensitive, tone-deaf cluelessness of too many of today’s Democratic leaders and others who label themselves “progressive”.

The civil rights demonstrators showed up at the Atlantic County Democratic Convention after more than two years of rallies, marches, public meetings, open letters, and hand delivered invitations proved insufficient in getting the attention of the New Jersey Governor, or any of the Democratic legislators from Atlantic County’s 2nd District.

Since the beginning of our campaign for school desegregation, Governor Murphy has avoided us like one of the biblical plagues of Exodus. For even requesting their attendance at a local community meeting in October 2021, A campaign official for 2nd District Democrats accused us of being “combative” and “harassing their candidates” for even including their names on the



invitation list. Even after the November election, our defeated lame-duck legislators continued to stonewall us as did the nearly defeated Democratic Governor whose own campaign official called our post-election Op Ed “misguided” and “half-baked”.

Unlike Pharaoh, we can only guess what has hardened the heart of Governor Murphy and what drives him to evade the issue of school segregation and resist all our efforts to sit down with him to begin solving this shameful but solvable problem.

We have been told by his staff it is because there is “ongoing litigation” related to school segregation. He should know this is a red herring. The fact that plaintiffs have sued the state over what is a constitutional violation in no way prevents the Governor from acting to address it. If anything, it should compel him to act more quickly to avoid costly litigation and to head off an ill-chosen, convoluted remedy likely to be imposed by the courts if he fails to act.

Some say it's ‘too complicated’. “There is no statewide instant fix,” the Murphy Administration argued in court on March 3<sup>rd</sup>. “The entire education system in New Jersey would have to be razed to the ground and then rebuilt brick by brick”. This too is an excuse worthy of Pharaoh. Our group, the Coalition Against Racial Exclusion, part of Building One America, has built support while receiving input from experts, educators, practitioners, constituency leaders and legislators for a set of meaningful yet completely achievable recommendations for tackling school segregation throughout the state. Our proposal, recently presented in a hearing to the Joint Committee on Public Schools, includes immediate steps this administration and the legislature can take to reduce segregation while halting anymore decisions that increase it.

Those recommendations include a strengthened school funding formula to incentivize diverse and integrated schools, the use of a more robust and targeted version of the Interdistrict Choice program to create opportunities in high performing districts, county and magnet schools to better achieve regional integration and an immediate ban on any more separations such as Maywood's split from Hackensack's High School or the petition now pending before the Commissioner for Absecon to leave Pleasantville. Like Pharaoh's bricks without straw, these unconstitutional secessions being approved, or even considered, by the Murphy Administration make it even harder for us to halt and begin to reverse the damage school segregation has done to our state.

Governor Murphy should not need plagues or even demonstrations to compel him to act on this agenda now. He should be moved by the immorality of the preventable harm school segregation has caused to students and communities. He should be further motivated by the calamity we are about to experience in the wake of the two years of shutdowns and hybrid learning that has disproportionately set back children in the most segregated schools, already vulnerable and already deeply disadvantaged by no fault of their own.