



Testimony of Building One New Jersey to the Joint Committee on the Public Schools Pastor Willie D. Francois, III.

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Let me start by thanking Chairwoman Jacey and the entire Joint Committee, and especially Senator Joe Cryan for initiating this conversation by taking the bold step of introducing legislation this year aimed squarely at the issue of school segregation with Senate Bill 820.

Our group, the Coalition Against Racial Exclusion a part of Building One America, has thought a lot about this issue and has built support while receiving input throughout the state (and nationally) from experts, practitioners, and constituency leaders for our recommendations.

I will attempt to summarize our specific recommendations for legislative action which has or will be reinforced by other witnesses who are also our partners and advisors including professors Orfield and Wilson, Superintendents Rocco and Kummings as well as the Mainland Pleasantville NAACP and, of course, the Education Law Center.

We want to reinforce the statement by Sharon Kregel that the legislature *and the Governor* must not wait for a court ruling before tackling a problem this important and this critical.

The motivation and opportunities to do this now are threefold.

One: You do not want the courts to impose a remedy. It's not their job and they will get it wrong.

Two: We are facing a catastrophe of post-pandemic learning loss. Early data shows what should be no surprise. Too many children in segregated schools are falling further behind than ever before.

Three: The political opportunity is *now*. While *intense* segregation by race and class is getting worse, diversity has been spreading throughout the suburbs. New Jersey's diverse middle-class suburbs *have a self-interest* in combating segregation and therein lies the opportunity for broad-based, multi-racial, and even bipartisan support for a meaningful and lasting legislative approach.

Here are our principles for ending school segregation in New Jersey.

- A school integration plan must involve everyone. It must be statewide & involve entire regions [1] if it is to shut off doors to "flight".
- It must use a demographic and "opportunity" [2] analysis to set achievable & fair goals for integration.
- The aim must be to incentivize & push all districts, schools, classrooms, and even faculty to better reflect the diversity of their regions & the state.

The specific legislative tools can include the following:

1. Reform & strengthen the DOE's civil rights capacity so it can develop a desegregation plan & has the power, funds, mandate, and expertise to enforce it. We can start by amending & passing S820 sponsored by Senator Joe Cryan.
2. End secessions. Ban the terminating of any more regional send-receive arrangements or the dissolution of unified districts. Amend the new School Consolidation Bill to prohibit secessions while requiring an *affirmative* obligation to promote integration.
3. Expand & strengthen the state school funding formula to reward & incentivize diverse & integrated schools in cities *as well as* our many diverse, middle-class suburbs.
4. Direct & increase school aid to support & incentivize local integration & desegregation best practices where diversity already exists, especially in our many diverse suburbs.

Places like South Orange/Maplewood, Woodbridge, Hamilton, and Galloway already reflect the diversity of their region and the state. These places need carrots, not sticks, to become beacons of diversity and supporters of integration.

Bill S354 which establishes School Funding Formula Evaluation Task Force should make integration a goal of school funding.

5. A desegregation plan must be based on a thorough analysis of racial as well as economic factors including a district's property tax capacity.
6. Reform the Interdistrict Public School Choice program to be a *mandatory* tool to help districts achieve integration goals across district boundaries within regions.
7. Require charter schools to be fully integrated and to meet integration goals based on *regional demographics not their district or neighborhood.*
8. Designate & support pro-integration magnet schools & require county schools to meet regional economic & racial integration goals.
9. We can strengthen the Fair Housing Act to increase *Mount Laurel* obligations on "far flung" communities that maintain exclusionary schools and lessen affordable housing obligations for diverse districts that meet integration goals.

Caveats:

- a) *Avoid short-term quick-fixes, especially costly expenditures in place of true inclusion. Separate is never equal and it's very costly to taxpayers.*
- b) *Don't Blame the Victim. NJ's high poverty districts did not create segregation and their students did not choose it. They should not bear the burden of fixing it.*
- c) *Not all suburban & urban districts are the same; we must consider the relative diversity & fiscal capacity of all districts.*
- d) *Do No Harm - Best intentions often bring harmful consequences, including well-meaning proposals such as:*
 - County consolidation. Most NJ counties will not capture a diverse enough area to stop white flight.
 - Simply removing district boundaries would only accelerate flight & deepen segregation.
 - Magnet & vocational schools (or charters) should not be allowed to create new layers of exclusion. They must all meet meaningful goals for reflecting the economic & racial mix of their region.

[\[1\]](#) *Regions* are defined as geographical areas large enough to capture both the highest & lowest opportunity type districts within a Metropolitan Statistical Area.

[\[2\]](#) *Opportunity* is defined by social & economic factors such as income, wealth, quality schools, jobs & tax base.