


The Politics of School Districting: A Case Study in Upstate New York

By Sue Books

Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the *Plessy* doctrine of “separate but equal” in 1953 in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the nation has not moved steadily towards the envisioned ideal of equal educational opportunity—a requisite of which, the *Brown* court found, would be the abolition of racial segregation in schooling. Rather, our school system still is far too “separate and unequal.” After spending many hours over a period of many years in high-poverty and high-minority central city schools, Jean Anyon (1997) described practices of “ghetto schooling” and Jonathan Kozol (2006) condemned what he calls our system of “apartheid education.” Gary Orfield and his colleagues at The Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, who have been publishing annual reports on the demographics of public schooling in the U.S., recently documented an “educational landscape that is increasingly multiracial yet, simultaneously, separate and unequal” (Orfield & Lee, 2006).


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To the now-expansive literature on the causes and consequences of segregation in schooling and of inequality in educational opportunity in the United States, I would like to add a call for more attention to

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the politics of school districting—that is, to how and why districts are created, in the service of whose interests, and with what consequences for students.¹ Towards that end, this article reconstructs the solidification of a school district in upstate New York, the Spackenkill Union Free Schools, a six-mile-wide district in the town of Poughkeepsie. In a battle with the New York State Education Department in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Spackenkill schools succeeded in avoiding consolidation with their poorer, larger, and far more diverse neighboring district, the Poughkeepsie City Schools. (The town of Poughkeepsie includes both the city of Poughkeepsie and the community known as Spackenkill.)

In the discussion that follows, I recount the story of Spackenkill’s pursuit of “independence,” as reconstructed from newspaper articles written at the time, school board minutes, and personal conversations with the president of the Spackenkill Board of Education and a Poughkeepsie resident who lived through the struggle.² I then offer an analysis of the ideals and interests that shaped the district’s conflict with the State Education Department. Finally, I comment on the significance of this small chapter of social history for reformers still working towards desegregation and more equal educational opportunity.

How the Spackenkill School District Was Created

A drive to consolidate school districts during the decades after World War II reduced the number from 100,000 in 1945 to just 16,000 by 1980 (Ravitch, 1983). In what arguably was “one of the most dramatic of all changes in America’s patterns of government,” districts were combined into larger units through a carrot-and-stick approach of legislative inducements and penalties (Garms, Guthrie, and Pierce, 1978, p. 32). The Spackenkill school district bucked this trend. The story of how and why it resisted consolidation provides a case study of sorts that illustrates some of the tactics, rhetoric, and imbalances of power that set the stage for the 21st-century version of “separate but equal.” It also provides a cautionary lesson for reformers still struggling to expand educational opportunity for the young people who have been shortchanged by the public schools for so long—largely, poor students and students of color.

Although the New York State Education Department tried to block the Spackenkill Board of Education’s efforts to attain “independence” from its neighbor, the state courts ultimately sided with the school board. A new high school building solidified the Spackenkill-Poughkeepsie split and laid the groundwork for the present reality: side-by-side districts, one a relatively large, predominantly minority, high-poverty and high-needs district (Poughkeepsie), and the other a small, predominantly white, low-poverty and relatively low-needs district (Spackenkill).

The Spackenkill Board of Education stressed the “excellence” of its own schools and the value of “local control” throughout its campaign to separate from the Poughkeepsie schools, and in this way set the terms of the moral debate to a considerable extent. The issue from the Spackenkill Board’s perspective was the quality of its educational program, not what its independence would mean for the

Poughkeepsie students. However, one consequence of its independence was considerably more race- and class-based segregation.

The Spackenkill case made its way through the New York courts during roughly the same time as a case involving the Detroit city schools advanced to the U.S. Supreme Court. In *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), parents in the largely black city school district sought approval of a busing plan that would include students in neighboring suburban districts as a way to desegregate the city schools and ensure better schooling for their children. In the Spackenkill case, parents in the largely white and relatively wealthy district located in the town, but not the city, of Poughkeepsie sought court support for a plan to keep their older students out of the city high school and, arguably, to ensure they would benefit from the tax revenues from a nearby IBM plant. In this sense, the Spackenkill story illustrates the flip side of the coin of stalled desegregation efforts after the *Brown* decision. It is not just that the courts told low-wealth Black parents “no”; they also told higher-wealth White parents “yes.”

From the vantage point of 2006 and my own beliefs about what public schooling should do and be, the Spackenkill Board of Education’s pursuit of a high school of its own emerges as a story of dogged persistence, of a willingness and ability to fight on multiple fronts, and of enormous confidence—born no doubt, at least in part, from awareness of the power of the community’s wealth and influence. The Spackenkill Board hired outside attorneys to take its fight with the State Education Department into the state courts, had friends in the State Legislature push bills favorable to its agenda, and consistently framed its case in a rhetoric of “excellence” aligned with “local control” and “independence.” This language enabled key players to avoid ever directly addressing what opponents regarded as the key issues: race, class, and the desire to create what amounts to a publicly supported educational haven in a largely white and upper-middle-class suburban community.

The Economic Context

Let me back up. The story of the Spackenkill schools needs to start with IBM, which opened a plant in the Spackenkill part of the town of Poughkeepsie in 1942. Executives recruited highly educated professionals for the new plant—people who could afford expensive homes and the property taxes that flowed into neighborhood schools. According to a local history, the new plant, in the context of a broader suburbanization, took a toll on the city.

IBM arrived and changed the economic base of Poughkeepsie and [Dutchess] County. By the late 1940s and 1950s, the growing use of the automobile often made the city a vast traffic jam. People from all of Dutchess County came to shop on Main Street, where owners proudly displayed their names on their stores. However, by the early 1960s, some industries had left the city, a few relocating to the town. Supermarkets and shopping centers began to line Dutchess Turnpike as well as South Road (site of the IBM plant). Local businesses that had flourished for generations found themselves facing heavy competition from large national chains, often encouraged by developers to “anchor” new plazas. (Ghee & Spence, 1999/2000, p. 79)

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Twenty-five years after IBM opened the Poughkeepsie facility, the city of Poughkeepsie submitted a Model Cities Proposal for federal funding of a much-needed revitalization of a neighborhood known as “the old city.” The authors of the proposal note that as the town of Poughkeepsie, bolstered by the IBM presence, grew, the city deteriorated:

The Town’s growth has resulted in a corresponding attrition of land values and population loss which has contributed over a number of years to the deterioration of the City of Poughkeepsie. (Poughkeepsie, 1967, Section A, Part II, p. 1)

The economic base of Dutchess County is clearly manufacturing. This is a strong base and of the three largest industries, IBM employs 17,000 or over 50% of the manufacturing labor force. . . . None of [the major manufacturers] have their major plants within the City of Poughkeepsie, although they employ many of the city’s residents. (Poughkeepsie, 1967, Section A, Part II, 2)

In spite of the fact that Poughkeepsie is located in the heart of a rapidly growing and developing County, only a small part of this growth has been reflected in the City. . . . [T]he dynamic forces of economic activity which have flooded the County with more people, more jobs, and more money threaten the City with increasing deterioration and decay. (Poughkeepsie, 1967, Section A, Part II, 3-4)

In 1960, the average family income in the town of Poughkeepsie was \$6,614 per year; within the city of Poughkeepsie, it was \$5,500 a year. For non-white residents of the city, the median income was only \$2,475 per year. “When comparing the non-white weekly family income to that of New York City’s Central Harlem, we find that the average Poughkeepsie Negro family is earning \$4.00 less than the residents of Harlem,” the authors of the *Model Cities Proposal* wrote (Poughkeepsie, 1967, Section B, Part II, 1).

A Battle of Wills

Five years after IBM opened the plant in Poughkeepsie, the New York State Education Department published a Master Plan calling for consolidation of the Spackenkill Union Free School District and the Poughkeepsie City School District. Union free school districts were established by the State Legislature in 1853, with the idea that two or more would join together to provide a high school program. Many of the early union free districts had boundaries that overlapped or were close to the boundaries of a village or city, as is the case with Spackenkill and the city of Poughkeepsie (*Guide to Reorganization*, 2004).

In 1956, district residents overwhelmingly endorsed a plan for Spackenkill to build a high school so that its older students would no longer need to attend Poughkeepsie High. This flew in the face of the State Education Department’s plans, announced in 1947 and reaffirmed many times thereafter, for consolidation of the districts. As a carrot for compliance, the State Education Department initially offered a 10% increase in operating funds for the combined district for five years. The Spackenkill Board of Education was not interested. Aware that inclusion of the

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district in the state's Master Plan meant the state would not subsidize construction of a new high school, the Spackenkill Board voted in March 1964 to appeal the State Education Department's decision to keep it on the list. By this time a war of words, public and private, had already begun. In response to comments by a hearing officer for the State Education Department, the Spackenkill Board published a statement rebutting allegations of elitism:

The Board feels [the hearing officer's] remarks concerning "a private school system" to be pure nonsense. . . . Since 1865 Spackenkill has, in fact and by reputation, been providing quality education for children in the district. . . . The question of "responsibility" as stated by [the hearing officer] has little value and, in fact, is a curious attitude in view of the swing towards "community control" and "decentralization." (Thomsen, 1964)

In 1967, district residents voted for a referendum to purchase land for a high school by a ratio of 10 to 1. The school board also applied to the state for building aid that year, and, not surprisingly, was turned down. The State Commissioner of Education responded to the application by reaffirming the State Plan calling for merger of the Spackenkill and Poughkeepsie districts, and made clear that he consequently would not register a high school in the Spackenkill district. Attorneys for the Spackenkill Board of Education then met with an attorney with the State Department of Education. The state attorney said that the district would not be granted building aid and, if it built a school anyway, would not be allowed to operate it. School board minutes include a transcript of part of the conversation, including this conclusion by the school board attorneys: "We are in a fight but it should not be entirely a hostile one. Mr. Jehu [State Education Department attorney] is well aware of our situation and understands our position and why we are determined to fight, but he is confident he will beat us" (Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, September 11, 1967).

The Poughkeepsie Board of Education, seemingly a minor player in the struggle, favored consolidation. In November 1967, the local paper quoted the city school board president calling plans to build a high school in Spackenkill "an unnecessary and unwarranted expenditure of state and local funds" (City labels, 1967).

The Spackenkill Board of Education hired outside attorneys to continue a two-pronged fight in the state courts to try to compel the Commissioner of Education to register the new high school, and with the State Education Department to have the district removed from the Master Plan. In January 1968, the Board of Education filed a suit challenging denial of its request for building aid and the Commissioner's power to refuse to register a new high school. The case made its way to the state's highest court, which upheld the denial of building aid, but found that the Commissioner had no grounds for refusing to register the proposed high school (*Carter v. Allen*, 1969). This gave Spackenkill the green light it needed to proceed.

Shortly thereafter the Spackenkill Board of Education again applied for building aid, and the Commissioner again denied the application. At the school board's request, a committee of the Board of Regents appointed by the Chancellor then held

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a hearing on the matter. The committee found that the change Spackenkill proposed to the State Plan would “not assure and provide equally efficient and economical educational facilities to the area affected, and that the educational interests of the school children in the area [would] not be at least equally served by the proposed change” (Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, September 6, 1967).

Undeterred, the Spackenkill Board of Education set September 20, 1969, as the date for a district-wide vote on construction of a new high school. A public hearing was held two days before the vote, and opponents spoke out. Most stressed not the cost of building a new school, but rather the “the moral and social responsibility of sending the high school students to Poughkeepsie High School” (Cameron, 1969). Opponents included a former president of the Spackenkill Board of Education, Hazel Barcher, who taught first in Poughkeepsie and then in Spackenkill. She said she had a change of heart after much soul searching and no longer supported a separate Spackenkill district. “Times have changed very rapidly over the last few years,” she said. “Listen to these students [who had spoken previously]. I don’t think there is anything wrong in Poughkeepsie that human beings cannot fix” (Cameron, 1969).

Kenneth Parker, son of a Methodist minister, told the group, “If we build our own high school, all we are doing is creating a middle-class ghetto high school. I see no other word for it than racism with the result of leaving Poughkeepsie to rot.” A Poughkeepsie High School senior from the Spackenkill district, Kathy Will, spoke about the benefits of crossing district lines. “When we went [to Poughkeepsie],” she said, “they thought of us as snobs. I think their opinion of us has changed as us of them.” Harry Cochran, a Black parent, said his sons might be proud of him then if he voted for the new school, “but later when they realize the issues, they’d say I was a Tom if I voted for it. Students throughout the world are speaking out against inequities, and they’re disrespecting the system, which is us” (Cameron, 1969). The day before the vote, three clergy living in the Spackenkill district issued a joint statement, and suggested that the central issue was not the “excellence” of the Spackenkill schools, but rather the educational opportunity to be provided for all the children in the area:

Instead of expressing concern only for our suburban educational needs we should be preparing to share our leadership and resources to help meet the educational needs of the entire area. . . . We see far too many frightening signs that we in the Poughkeepsie area are rushing headlong toward that disaster [of becoming two societies, one black and one white]. . . . In effect, Spackenkill seeks to remain very separate, largely white, and increasingly unequal. (Clergymen, 1969)

The next day residents approved construction of a new high school by a vote of roughly two to one, despite the local opposition, despite reaffirmation by the State Department of Education of its plan calling for consolidation, and despite having no promise of building aid from the state. Construction began the next spring.

Lawyers hired by the Spackenkill Board of Education had been working behind the scenes to win legislative approval of a bill that would enable the district to qualify for state building aid in spite of the State Education Department’s opposition. The

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State Legislature passed the bill, but the governor then vetoed it. In a letter to Assemblyman Emeel Betroe, Orville Todd, district principal, thanked him “for shepherding our building aid through the recent legislature” and “supporting the cause” (Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, September 3, 1970). Shortly thereafter, in another setback, the state appellate court reversed a judgment of the State Supreme Court, Albany County, ordering the Commissioner of Education to grant building aid to the district for a new high school (*Saslaw v. Nyquist*, 1971).

By that time, the Spackenkill Board of Education had approved a plan for phasing students out of Poughkeepsie High School, despite opposition from the ninth graders who would be pulled back, from the Poughkeepsie Teachers Association, from the Poughkeepsie Board of Education, and from the State Education Department. When Anthony Tereno, a State Education Department official heard of the plans, he challenged the school board to justify its action. In a letter to Quimby Heotzler, school board president at the time, Tereno disputed claims the Spackenkill district apparently had made that its actions were motivated by concerns about the quality of schooling at Poughkeepsie High. Tereno decided to see for himself, spent a day at the high school visiting multiple classrooms, and found nothing alarming. He wrote:

I was told that because of poor internal conditions in the high school . . . there is great opposition in your community to the further sending of students to this school. . . . Contrary to the impression your group had conveyed to me, I saw a well-organized school in which the students and faculty are working together in an atmosphere of mutual respect. The school has a well qualified, experienced faculty and a wide range of curricular offerings. I am certain your students are receiving a strong educational program in this school. (Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, December 15, 1970)

Tereno suggested that Spackenkill board members do the same—that is, visit the school themselves. Nothing in the school board minutes or local news accounts suggests they ever did.

A few weeks later, the Poughkeepsie City Board of Education passed a resolution asking the Spackenkill board

to reconsider its decision to withhold attendance of 10th grade pupils at Poughkeepsie High School for the 1971-1972 school year, and further that it be requested to meet with the Poughkeepsie Board of Education to discuss this matter; and further that it reconsider its opposition to consolidation with the Poughkeepsie School District. (Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, February 2, 1971)

William Pappas, president of the Poughkeepsie school board, sent a copy of the resolution to Heotzler, who referred it to a committee. After the matter hit the press, Heotzler wrote a letter to residents assuring them that the letter from Pappas would “be given such attention as deemed necessary and . . . be handled strictly as inter-board correspondence”—that is, not as a matter for public debate (Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, February 23, 1971). “We are firmly committed to the plan to phase in our high school program starting with the 10th grade students this

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fall,” Heetzler wrote in a letter to Pappas three months later. “In both these topics [merger and phase-in of the program] we are expressing what we unequivocally believe to be the best interest of our district and reflecting, by and large, the strong wishes and desires of our electorate” (Spackenkill Board of Education Minutes, May 10, 1971). In other words, the response to the request to meet was no.

About a year later, in a third court proceeding, the state appellate court considered a challenge by Spackenkill to the most recent reaffirmation of the State Plan for School District Reorganization calling for its consolidation with the Poughkeepsie city schools. The court ruled against Spackenkill because, it said, the district had failed to show that a separate high school would benefit students in both districts:

[The Spackenkill district] devoted its effort to establishing that Spackenkill has and will have a superior school system. It made no study of the Poughkeepsie system and consequently was unable to judge the effect of withdrawing some 400 high school students from Poughkeepsie. The proof in opposition established that such a change would have a deleterious effect on the Poughkeepsie program. Further support for the State Plan was the proof that a larger school district offers a greater variety of courses. It is the educational systems of both districts with which the Regents must concern itself and not just one. (*Saslaw v. Board of Regents*, 1971)

In fact, the Court of Appeals had already found that the Commissioner of Education could not refuse to register a high school in Spackenkill (*Carter v. Allen*, 1969). The Spackenkill Board of Education continued on its course and celebrated its achievement on June 5, 1972, with dedication ceremonies for the new high school. Sen. Jay P. Rolison Jr., a district resident who had pursued the Spackenkill agenda through legislative channels, gave the keynote speech. In it, he cast the long struggle as a fight for “quality education” born of “a fierce pride and determination . . . which is Spackenkill’s hallmark” (Rolison Urges, 1972).

A ‘Tough Call’

Norman Carter (2005), Spackenkill Board of Education president during the early years of the struggle and the lead plaintiff in the first lawsuit, recalls the clash of wills in this way, 40 years or so later:

Poughkeepsie wanted our students. The stated reason was that Spackenkill had a higher-quality program with good students. Spackenkill residents were relatively well to do. The state’s position was that if Spackenkill students were pulled out, this would damage the Poughkeepsie situation. The crux of the moral issue was, was Spackenkill really harming Poughkeepsie? Some people felt we weren’t doing our part in raising the Poughkeepsie situation, but people out here [in Spackenkill] wanted the high school so badly. . . . It was a tough call—and a close call, really—about whether we were doing the right thing. But you don’t cure the problem of a school district by getting bigger. The community must become involved. That’s where it’s difficult for Poughkeepsie. Part of it was that people weren’t well off. My feeling at the time was that Spackenkill isn’t going to cure this problem.

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In fact, the state did not frame “the crux of the moral issue” as whether Spackenkill was harming Poughkeepsie, but rather as whether Spackenkill’s “independence” would benefit students in Poughkeepsie as well as Spackenkill. “The burden of proof was on us to show that by remaining independent it was to the advantage of both sets of students,” Carter acknowledged. “We took the position that with the growing population [in Spackenkill] Poughkeepsie High School wasn’t big enough. The state said, ‘Well, if you consolidate, they’ll be money there because of IBM and Poughkeepsie can build more high school space.’” Was that not true? “Well, a neighborhood school isn’t the same thing as traveling to Poughkeepsie,” Carter responded. “It’s not the same experience for kids. I like the idea of local control. We could get our own teachers and look for the best” (Carter, 2005).

The decision making had a social context, of course. The 1960s and 1970s were times of great social turmoil. As the *Poughkeepsie Model Cities Proposal* (1967) documents, the economic base of the city of Poughkeepsie was unraveling, and racial tensions here, as elsewhere, were high. “As far as people out here [in Spackenkill] were concerned, [racial tensions] didn’t figure in,” Carter said. “But people in Albany and in the city of Poughkeepsie were bothered by this.”

Carter saw Spackenkill’s independence instead as an opportunity to create a model high school. A prosperous, tight-knit community with an IBM tax base behind its schools had a chance, he believed, to “cater to the unusual.” He explained:

For the good of the nation, there have to be schools that cater to the unusual. And this doesn’t happen if you throw a kid in with the general mix. You have to give them the opportunity to develop in accord with particular talents. We need not only to educate the general populace, but to pay a lot of attention to the unusual. We are falling behind as a nation in that regard. (Carter, 2005)

As Carter sees it, the district failed to make the most of its opportunity to become the model school he envisioned. After the long struggle, Carter and his wife opted not to send the oldest three of their five children to Spackenkill High. Instead, the three boys (who were not Quaker) attended a private Quaker school near their home with an excellent reputation.

Lillie Zimet, a Poughkeepsie resident who lived through the struggle too, is also disappointed in the outcome of the clash, but for a different reason. She recalled:

The feeling was that [Spackenkill going its own way] was detrimental to the rest. The fear was that it would split off, well, a “well-off” group. Real estate was higher there. The fear was it would deprive the Poughkeepsie district, which would become more imbalanced, financially and in terms of [academic] standards. And, of course, that’s what did happen. Poughkeepsie [High] became an inner-city school.

The Spackenkill school district’s website describes the outcome of the decades-long struggle as a dream of independence come true: “The uniqueness of remaining independent without centralization with other districts has helped Spackenkill remain a small and closely-knit school district. . . . In 1967 the residents passed, by an overwhelming majority, a referendum to purchase land for a high school,

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a dream of district residents for more than 20 years” (Spackenkill Union Free School District, 2004). Next door, the Poughkeepsie schools are trying just to find adequate classroom space. According to a history of the city schools written by Karen Markeloff, assistant superintendent for elementary education, the district in 2001-2002 had “an immediate need to add space for just the purpose of accommodating the present elementary enrollment in a manner that will enable us to stop using substandard space, such a closets, stairwells and storage facilities, for programs for children” (Markeloff, 2002).

As the chart below shows, student demographics and high school completion rates in the two districts now differ significantly.

Data for Spackenkill and Poughkeepsie School Districts, 2003-2004

| | Spackenkill | Poughkeepsie |
|---|-------------|--------------|
| Total enrollment (grades 9-12) | 1,835 | 4,678 |
| % White (not Hispanic) | 74.4% | 20.1% |
| % eligible for free lunch | 5.2% | 65.1% |
| % teachers teaching out of certification area | 3.3% | 6.2% |
| % graduates earning Regents diplomas | 79% | 39% |
| % graduates planning to attend a 4-year college | 58% | 33% |
| % non-completers | 3% | 18.3% |

Source: New York State School Report Card Comprehensive Information Reports

Disparities in per-pupil spending in the districts are not significant, largely because the state contributes a larger percentage of the total funding in Poughkeepsie. However, Spackenkill homeowners are taxed at only 30% of the rate paid by home-owners in the city of Poughkeepsie. Assessment levels also differ, so a clean comparison is difficult.

A Cautionary Tale

Spackenkill managed to survive as a separate school district despite a national push and very focused pressure from the New York State Education Department to consolidate in part, it seems, by invoking a powerful rhetoric of local control. Federal and state courts have accepted arguments about the need to preserve local control of schools as justification for upholding state systems of school funding, despite the significant disparities that almost all these systems generate (Education Trust, 2005). For example, in the landmark case *San Antonio v. Rodriguez* (1973), the U.S. Supreme Court found that the Texas system of school funding, “though concededly imperfect,” given the disparities it produced, nevertheless bore a rational relationship to a legitimate state purpose. “While assuring a basic education for every child in the State, it permits and encourages participation

in and significant control of each district's schools at the local level," the Court found.

The Spackenkill Board of Education and its advocates used the language of local control not to defend funding inequities directly, but rather to justify the creation of a haven. The Spackenkill Board president told his counterpart in Poughkeepsie that in continuing with plans to pull the Spackenkill students out of Poughkeepsie High, "we are expressing what we unequivocally believe to be [in] the best interest of our district." Further explanation was not provided, but the language (and the assumption that nothing more need be said) suggests a consciousness of "our schools" versus "theirs," of "our schools" unburdened by "their" problems.

The creation of the Spackenkill school district could be seen as an example of competing notions about what schools should do (Labaree, 1997). This conflict surfaced in the public discourse surrounding Spackenkill's effort to sever its ties with the Poughkeepsie schools. Supporters of a separate Spackenkill district invoked a vision of a proud and determined community pursuing a dream of independence through talk about local or community control and excellence in schooling. Spackenkill parents, they argued, wanted the best possible schooling for their own children. Opponents spoke instead of social responsibility, and invoked a vision of a society united around a commitment to equal educational opportunity, regardless of race and family income. The state appellate court noted the clash of ideals in criticizing Spackenkill for continuing to emphasize the superiority of its schools without ever considering how pulling its students back would affect students in the Poughkeepsie district.

More was going on here, however, than a difference of opinion about the purposes of schooling. This was also a clash of wills among unequal partners. Whereas the state asked Spackenkill to show how pulling its high school students back from Poughkeepsie would benefit both districts, Spackenkill responded by answering a different question—namely, how the separation would benefit Spackenkill students. The Spackenkill Board of Education and its supporters not only used a powerful rhetoric of local control, but also presumed—correctly, it seems—that they could frame the conflict as they saw fit. In this sense, the Spackenkill story illustrates the role of power and wealth in the politics of school districting and, through this, the distribution of educational opportunity. With district funds, the Spackenkill school board was able to hire private attorneys; to build a high school without state help, at least at first³; and to count on support from its friends in the State Legislature. The State Education Department, initially confident that it could "beat" the district, in the end could not.

More was at stake in the Spackenkill-Poughkeepsie conflict than the opportunity for Spackenkill families to ensure "good schools" for their own children. The Spackenkill Board's stated concerns about the quality of schooling at Poughkeepsie High apparently were uninformed by direct experience. After prevailing against the State Education Department, Carter sent three of his children to a private school more prestigious than Spackenkill High, even though Spackenkill High by all ac-

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counts provided, and continues to provide, a very good educational experience for its students. Carter believed the Spackenkill district, unhinged from the city schools, potentially could create a model high school that would “cater to the unusual,” but he offered no explanation of why this could not happen in a consolidated district. The driving concern seems to have been not just schools that were “good,” but schools that were better than others, and a conviction that separation from Poughkeepsie was required, regardless of what was happening in the schools.

In her study (not in Poughkeepsie) of the social construction of “good schools,” Holme (2002) found that prospective homebuyers seeking to buy in a “good” school district rarely relied on first-hand knowledge of schools and classrooms. Rather, they asked high-status friends and coworkers which schools they thought were good and took note of the communities those schools served. “While who was talking about a particular school was an important indicator of its quality, who was attending a school was often the determining factor for parents about which schools to send their children to” (Holme, 2002, p. 192). In this way, in a circular and self-serving loop, high-status homeowners affirmed, and even created, high-status schools that shored up the status of particular communities, and perpetuated residential and school segregation. As Holme (2002) put it:

Status . . . dominated every aspect of these parent’s choices. They not only implicitly trusted the information given to them by other high-status parents, but also read a great deal into these parents’ own school choices. As such, the parents in this study assumed that those schools serving the children of high-status parents—whether neighborhood schools or private schools—were superior to those serving the children of lower-status parents. Thus, for the parents in the study, the assumed quality of the schools was directly associated with the status of the families they served. (p. 180)

Those seeking independence for Spackenkill seemingly wanted to ensure the best possible schooling for their children, who they believed were special and deserving. They also wanted to avoid affiliation with the poorer and more diverse Poughkeepsie schools, which they seemed to fear would jeopardize what they regarded as their own children’s special status.

The Struggle for Equal Educational Opportunity, Continued

Spackenkill ultimately got what it wanted, and, taking needs and resources into account, is now in much better shape than the neighboring Poughkeepsie school district. The New York State Education Department (2004) now designates Poughkeepsie as a “high-needs” school district. Fewer teachers are teaching outside their certification areas in Spackenkill than in Poughkeepsie, more students are graduating with a Regents diploma (the most prestigious in New York State), and more graduates expect to go on to college (see chart on p. 24). Tinkering with the school funding system, the traditional route of educational reform, is unlikely to change these patterns; spending in both districts is near the

state average. However, altering the geography by redrawing district lines through consolidation might have.

Recent concerns with national academic achievement gaps among groups of students have, once again, raised broad questions about the geography of schooling (Kahlenberg, 2006). The 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress scores show significant disparities in standardized achievement between students of color and white students, between English language learners and native speakers of English, and among students in central city, rural, and suburban schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2005). A common thread in all these gaps is the persistent disparity in achievement between students living in poverty and their peers in more financially secure families. Consequently, the gaps should not be news to policymakers. Research consistently has shown that academic achievement declines as school poverty levels increase (Kennedy, Jung, & Orland, 1986; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Orland, 1994; Payne & Biddle, 1999; Puma, Jones, Rock, & Fernandez, 1993), especially when concentrated poverty overwhelms a school (McUsic, 1999).

Economic Integration Initiatives

Aware of the toll that concentrated poverty takes on school achievement, a few school districts—including LaCrosse, Wisconsin, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Wake County, North Carolina—have tried to integrate their schools on the basis of income rather than race, as a way to increase student achievement districtwide. LaCrosse was the first district to endorse economic integration as district policy when the school board adopted a “socioeconomic balance plan” in 1992. At the time, Wisconsin had the highest poverty rate in the nation for Asian children; 72% of the Asian children in the Lacrosse district lived in poverty. When an expanding enrollment required the district to build two new schools, district administrators saw an opportunity to try to desegregate the schools along the lines of socioeconomic status. Given the large Hmong population in the district, the plan promised also to increase racial desegregation. At the time, as many as 70% of the students at some schools received subsidized lunches (a common proxy for poverty level) versus as little as 4% at other schools. The “balance plan” included a busing provision designed to ensure that at each of the 11 schools in the district the population of students receiving subsidized lunches would be no greater than 45% and no less than 15%.

Not surprisingly, the plan met with strong opposition as well as support. “Those in favor of the plan praised its potential for teaching children to live with diversity. Those opposed to the plan called it an expensive and unwelcome experiment in social engineering. Further, opponents decried the shift away from neighborhood schools” (Plank, 2000, p. 7). After the school board approved the plan, 16 community leaders and professionals in the district formed what they called the Radical Alliance, which in turn called for ousting the board and firing the superintendent and other district administrators. Five school board members were replaced in a

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recall election. Nevertheless, the plan survived (Plank, 2000), and test scores across the district have gone up since then (Rimer, 2003).

The Cambridge school district adopted a similar policy in 2001 when it amended a public school choice program in a way designed to reduce sharp differences among schools in the percentage of students qualifying for subsidized meals. As the conservative reformer Abigail Thernstrom's sarcasm suggests, this policy, like the one in LaCrosse, has its critics: "There's something wrong with the assumption that if you've got too many low-income kids in a classroom, you can't teach them," she said. "My response to that is: No excuses. Start to educate the kids. . . . What are you going to do — helicopter the kids in?" (quoted in Rimer, 2003). In fact, the 6.2-square-mile Cambridge district is so small that no one needs to travel very far.

The Wake County district in North Carolina, which includes Raleigh, also decided to factor family income into school assignments, starting in 2002, to try to limit the number of students receiving subsidized lunches to no more than 40% at any school. There too the plan has encountered opposition, despite the fact that the district's schools have been doing very well, using state test scores as a gauge, and the fact that long bus rides have fallen most heavily on the poorest students. Members of a task force led by three local mayors urged the district to abandon its plan in favor of "neighborhood schools" (Reid, 2003). Parents complained that the plan is "unfair after they bought homes near the area's most reputable schools" (Richard, 2002). The president of a group opposed to the assignment plan claimed: "Kids are bused all over creation, and they say it's for economic diversity, but really it's a proxy for race" (quoted in Finder, 2005). The district superintendent has not backed down, however. "Is it worth doing?" he asked. "Look at 90 percent at or above grade level. Look at 139 schools, all of them successful. I think the answer is obvious" (Walter Sherlin, quoted in Finder, 2005). As of 2005, students of color in the district had made "dramatic strides in reading and math tests" (Finder, 2005). Whereas 40% of the Black students in grades three through eight scored at grade level on state tests ten years ago, 80% scored at grade level in 2005. Overall, 91% of the students scored at grade level in 2005, up from 79% ten years ago.

In Frederick County, Maryland, however, a plan designed to help students in a low-achieving elementary school by merging them with pupils from a high-achieving school a few miles away barely got a hearing. The school board dropped the idea as soon as parents of children in the high-achieving school, Ballenger Creek, began to protest. At a meeting to discuss the proposal, "Ballenger Creek's parents complained that a merger would disrupt their community. Others warned that their property values would fall and their children's education would suffer. 'Where's the research that shows it will benefit my high-achiever?' asked one mother" (Hoff, 2004). "What I was seeing and hearing was: 'I don't want my kids going to school with those kids,'" said an African-American father with children in the low-achieving school. "You know what the next word [was] that was going to come out of their mouth" (quoted in Hoff, 2004).

Legal Questions

While a handful of school districts are experimenting with economic integration, state courts are wrestling with questions about the nature of a state's obligation to ensure that the requisite social conditions exist for educational achievement (Books, 2003). In an important case decided in 1996, the Connecticut Supreme Court found that students in the Hartford public schools were not receiving the equal educational opportunity required by the state constitution, primarily because the students were racially and economically isolated, and that this isolation was the primary factor contributing to their poor performance in school (*Sheff v. O'Neill*, 1996). The court declined to specify a remedy, which set off a political struggle to address the problem that continued at least through 2003 when lawmakers approved a plan to open eight new magnet schools in the Hartford area in an attempt to reduce the racial isolation (Archer, 2003).⁴ Nevertheless, the remedy initially sought, redrawing school district lines to eliminate high-poverty districts, resonated with others.

In 2003, in a case that raised similar legal questions, New York's highest court ruled against the Rochester City School District in a finding that the state is not obligated to address concentrated poverty as part of its constitutional responsibility to provide a "sound basic education" statewide (*Paynter v. State*, 2003). Plaintiffs contended that the state had shirked its constitutional responsibility not primarily through lack of funding, but rather through failure to do anything about the racial and economic isolation of students. Furthermore, plaintiffs argued, the state contributed to this isolation through policies that confined low-income housing in the county largely to the city of Rochester and that precluded students in the city from attending more racially and economically integrated schools. The court acknowledged "an abundance of terrible educational results" (p. 6), including some of the lowest test scores and graduation rates in the state, as well as the links between concentrated poverty, racial isolation, and poor educational performance. Nevertheless, a majority found that "if the state truly puts adequate resources into the classroom, it satisfies its constitutional promise" (p. 8).

Judge George Bundy Smith argued, in dissent, that the majority interpreted the state's obligation far too narrowly:

If students lack access to a sound basic education because of a high number of uncertified teachers, then it is the State's responsibility to remedy that problem. If the concentration of poor and minority students, assuming it is true, will necessarily result in schools that do not offer the opportunity of a sound basic education, even with adequate funding, then the State should remedy that problem. (pp. 40-41)

Judge Smith also took issue with the majority contention that plaintiffs were seeking a remedy that would trample on local control. Plaintiffs asked only that the state "not draw district lines in a manner that encircles poor and minority students, and sets them up for failure," he argued (p. 44).

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All of this is to say that proponents of economic integration as well as reformers seeking to force states to ensure that social conditions conducive to academic achievement exist must reckon with the power of wealth and with the determination that led to the outcome in Spackenkill. As lawsuits focused on state obligations as well as opposition to economic integration initiatives show, the ideas and interests that drove Spackenkill continue to shape arguments about who is to receive what with respect to educational opportunity. An effort to shift the burden of proof (“There’s something wrong with the assumption that if you’ve got too many low-income kids in a classroom, you can’t teach them”), trading in the status-based currency of “good schools,” fear of what a more racially and economically diverse school community might mean for “my high-achiever”—all of this is familiar, as are the stakes: the educational opportunity provided to children across the nation, regardless of geography.

Along with whatever else one might take from the story of Spackenkill’s pursuit of a school district of its own, there is a lesson for advocates for the poor students and students of color who for so long have received far less from the public schools than their peers in wealthier and whiter communities. In the long and ongoing struggle for more equal educational opportunity, we cannot afford to overlook or underestimate the social divisions and commitments written into school district histories.

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Notes

¹ As examples of important studies that have been done in this area, see Brantlinger (2003) and Noblit and Dempsey (1996).

² To develop a chronology of the Spackenkill School Board’s struggle for “independence,” I reviewed all articles on the topic collected at the Poughkeepsie Public Library in Poughkeepsie. I also reviewed minutes of the Spackenkill Board of Education, made available by the district office in Poughkeepsie. On January 1, 2005, I spent about an hour talking with Norman Carter about the facts of the Spackenkill separation from Poughkeepsie and his views on the issues involved in the clash with the New York State Education Department. I also talked briefly by telephone on January 10, 2005, with Lillie Zimet, a Poughkeepsie resident who lived through the struggle.

³ Although I have been unable to document this, a former superintendent of the district told me the Spackenkill district was eventually reimbursed by the state for some of the building costs.

⁴ Superintendents are under no obligation to accept students from outside their districts, and most are opting not to. When 13 openings became available in seven towns in Fairfield County in the spring of 2005, 800 applications poured in (Cowan, 2005).

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