

DON'T TAKE EDUCATION PROGRESS FOR GRANTED



So much of this past year has taught us the danger of complacency. It turns out that many things we took for granted—travel, sports, even simple pleasures like going out for dinner and a movie—can vanish in the blink of an eye when a pandemic peaks and danger looms in everyday human interactions.

Perhaps the biggest danger of complacency is the complacency of progress. As we have been reminded throughout the summer of 2020, American society is still riven by inequality based on centuries of injustice, and as students, scholars, and educators, we have a part to play in moving forward.

There is a natural human tendency to want to see our era as a step forward from the bad old days behind us. We point to social progress—this year we celebrate a century of women’s suffrage, for example—and we think of technological progress—such as the Internet and social media that have improved our lives and helped us weather the COVID-19 lockdowns.

But progress is not automatic, nor assured, nor a straight line. In 1954,

attorney Thurgood Marshall, founder of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, won a Supreme Court victory for his plaintiffs, among them Linda Brown, who had been denied enrollment at the all-white elementary school closest to her house in Topeka, Kansas, because she was Black. The ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* overturned decades of state-sanctioned (*de jure*) public school segregation based on race. Marshall went on to become the first Black man appointed to be a US Supreme Court justice.

In the decades since the *Brown* decision, however, school districts across the United States have gradually retreated from that landmark victory, and *de facto* segregation in schools, housing, and employment is often the norm. In fact, school segregation has actually increased since the court-mandated busing and civil unrest of the 1950s, ‘60s, and ‘70s, according to research conducted for the UCLA Civil Rights Project.

The pandemic has revealed that unequal access to education can become a matter of life and death.

In my home state of Massachusetts, data collected by my colleague, Dr. Wardell Powell, show that COVID-19 infection rates correlate not just to race and ethnicity, as has been widely reported, but also to educational attainment. If you have a college degree, you are more likely to have a job that allows you to work from home, using technology to meet with colleagues, share documents, and access information. Your education literally protects you from the virus.

As we work together to reopen schools and colleges safely in the coming months, we must renew our efforts to educate for equity and justice. Everyone has the right to a high-quality education. Let’s not take anything for granted.



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