

How Segrenomics Undermines U.S. Education Today

Cutting School: The Segrenomics of Education by Noliwe Rooks (NY: The New Press, 2020)

Reviewed by Melanie Quackenbush

Noliwe Rooks critically examines the relationships between discrimination and segregation in education by analyzing historical successes and failures of attempts to improve learning and integration through policy, private sectors, and community work. She comes well-prepared for this daunting task. Rooks was raised in a multigenerational family of educators, and founded the Segrenomics Lab at Brown University. She personally experienced the effects of racial segregation in schools when she was a student, and became a strong supporter of integration. This book assumes some familiarity with the U.S. education system, but is full of accessible and thought-provoking ideas deserving a wide audience.

The introduction reviews numerous sources of educational funding that are specifically designated for public school districts which have low school achievement records and high numbers of disadvantaged students. This prepares readers to understand the “investment opportunity” that many businesses and entrepreneurs have capitalized on while working to bolster student achievement. Rooks then looks more in depth at major players in education reform, highlighting organizations like: Teach for America, Students for Education Reform (SFER), Edison Schools, and Democrats for Education Reform (DFER). In chapters two and three, the author explores the history of education and discrimination, especially in the South, to provide context for modern issues and to note similar policies and practices over time that have been used to oppress Black people in America. The fourth chapter examines discriminatory policies and practices in the North, and also looks at the (largely positive) effects of Black-led educational efforts including Marva Collins’s school and the Ivy Leaf School. Chapter five looks into virtual schools as a potential solution to the achievement gap between well-funded and under-funded schools, and identifies the effects on education, segregation, and company profits. Chapter six describes cases of parents enrolling their children in schools outside their districts to reveal the lengths that the wealthy majority went to to ensure that the two groups would not mix.

Though Rooks’ book was released just before the pandemic hit, it still applies to the current problems of the field. She explains why teachers, parents and other members of a community need to be involved in the conversations about education reform. Some

education programs led by ordinary community members have been extremely successful, but a sizeable number are created and run by people from wealthy backgrounds. Many of the decisions made in these programs are focused on profits rather than student learning. Decisions around education policy have also often been a force for oppression, which restricts the opportunities for Black Americans through official laws and loopholes of laws meant to support education.

Rooks advocates against ineffective education reform which negatively impacts people financially. Effective education reform requires understanding the work of teaching, the community’s needs, and the necessity of improving transportation, integration, and resources. School choice, such as charter schools and voucher programs for catholic schools, can also be a problem because funding gets diverted from students’ home districts. These programs also do not advance racial integration or improve educational opportunities. Too often vouchers go to wealthy students; transportation options/distance of schools limit accessibility; and a lot of school options have a majority white population. Virtual schools are also an important topic in the book because they are very profitable. They get the same amount of funding per student as a brick-and-mortar school despite fewer operating costs; meanwhile their performance rates regularly fall below state standards, and their retention rates are low.

Noliwe Rooks concludes that inequality, segregation, and separation in schooling leaves students and the system vulnerable to being used as an investment opportunity for educational entrepreneurs, investors, and businesses. I finished reading the book in agreement with author Naomi Klein on the back cover: “An astounding look at America’s segregated school system, weaving together historical dynamics of race, class, and growing inequality into one concise and commanding story.”

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