



Walter Stern on Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City

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Hosted by Dave Chancellor

Chancellor Hello and thanks for joining us for this episode of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor. For this episode, we're going to be hearing from Walter Stern who is an assistant professor in the history and educational policy studies departments here at UW-Madison. I interviewed him late in 2018 about his new book called *Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City*. His book, which focuses on the period from 1764-1960, looks at the role that schools played in the segregation of American cities with a particular focus on New Orleans. To start off, I asked him to explain what he means when he talks about schools shaping patterns of segregation and how this might change the way we think about the development of segregation in cities.

Stern The main argument I make in the book is that schools profoundly shape the urban landscape and racial order in New Orleans from the colonial period through the Jim Crow era. The question that animated much of the research was seeking to understand and explain how and why it is that metropolitan America became so starkly segregated along racial and class lines. And other scholars that have looked at that question or related questions have generally emphasized the role that housing policy has played in producing segregated metropolitan areas. And when they talk about schools and the persistence of school segregation, they typically emphasize that it was housing segregation that produced segregated schools and that's what explains why schools have remained so segregated. And in the book I essentially invert that argument and say that the opposite was also true, that schools produced segregated neighborhoods and policies relating to schooling helped to ensure disparities between areas that came to be identified as white residential areas and areas that came to be identified as black residential areas.

Chancellor Professor Stern, who grew up in New Orleans and then returned there for his graduate work at Tulane, says this project -- like a lot of research projects -- actually started in a completely different place.

Stern I was interested in looking at the period of school desegregation and in particular, the late 60s and early 1970s when federal courts were saying enough's enough, you cannot delay anymore. This has to happen. And so I began by looking at what that process was like in high schools in New Orleans and sort of as a tangent to that, I thought, ok, if I'm looking into the process of desegregation, I need to understand a little bit more about segregated education and, particularly since I was looking at high schools, how segregated high school education developed in New Orleans. And in the process of looking into the creation of what became the first black high school in the city in 1917 and then looking at the expansion of high school education for white students, I found that decisions about where schools were located and how and when they opened were really directly tied to these bigger questions of urban development and the resources that were flowing to neighborhoods. And since that seemed to run counter to a lot of what I was reading in urban history about housing policy created segregation, I thought this is something I should pursue further. So in way, some of the best research, I kind of stumbled into it in the archives and followed it from there to see just how strong this tie was between school policy and broader issues of urban development and resource allocation and the expansion of residential segregation and found across the city and across a really long period of time that there was a really strong connection and often it went both ways.

Stern, continued Sometimes decisions made pertained to schools affecting housing and broader issues of urban development and then other times planning and housing policies certainly having an impact in schooling, but the two were working in concert with one another.

Chancellor The second half of Stern's book has neighborhood level case studies that show how these dynamics between schools and housing policy and urban planning and development actually played out. The development of the first black high school in New Orleans that, as he mentioned, kind of sparked this line of research, is one of these case studies.

Stern That high school was called McDonough 35. It ended up being located in what at the time it formed -- it opened in 1917 and it opened in a neighborhood that at the time was incredibly diverse racially and ethnically. It was a main commercial strip through the area, South Rampart Street, with lots of retail shops, mostly owned by immigrants from Eastern Europe who were Jewish, along with a handful of shops owned by African Americans and Rampart Street was sort of where all the different people of the neighborhood met to shop and mingle and there were Italian immigrants, Russian Immigrants, African Americans essentially living together in this very diverse neighborhood and, around the turn of the 20th century, this was fairly typical of urban America, that you would see racially integrated neighborhoods, ethnically integrated neighborhoods. Schools became a very prominent issue in how this neighborhood developed because the neighborhood had a segregated white elementary school that many of the children of the Jewish immigrants went to. And then just a few blocks away, it had a segregated black elementary school. The black elementary school was in significantly worse physical condition. It was overcrowded, they only had outhouses, they didn't have toilets. And that segregated black school butted up against an officially recognized vice district in the city where prostitution was allowed. And in 1917, the city passed a new law saying that black prostitutes had to live in that area of the city. That sparked a protest from black residents saying we can't have this prostitution district directly across the street from the elementary school and so they put pressure on the school board to figure out a solution.

Chancellor Stern says that the solution the board came up with was to transfer students from the black elementary school, which was called Fisk, to the white elementary school, which was then called McDonough 13 -- it was renamed to McDonough 35.

Stern And that proposal sparked a real backlash from white parents and particularly these Jewish shop owners who had their stores and residences right next to the school. One thing that came out in the research was that in this debate, there are certainly elements of people just wanting to preserve their school and there were complaints about how their kids would have to cross railroad tracks, would have to leave the neighborhood to go school, but also it was really about much more than the school, it was really about the future of the neighborhood. This was a really diverse neighborhood, residentially. It was also diverse in that you had retail, residences, industry -- and this was at a time when cities were making a conscious effort to divide those aspects of the city, to have residential areas and commercial areas and industrial areas. And the white parents and shop owners who were complaining about the conversion of the school and protesting it. It was clear that for them, the school was sort of a proxy for the neighborhood and the race of the school was a proxy for the racial identity of the neighborhood as a whole. And they, correctly, it turned out, understood that if the neighborhood had a black school, it would be perceived as a black neighborhood and that it would be neglected and receive fewer resources than areas that were viewed as white neighborhoods.

Chancellor And Professor Stern says that this is what happened. So, I asked him to tell us more about how this actually played out in the neighborhood.

Stern Despite this really vigorous protest and a lawsuit filed by the Jewish shop owners and residents, the school board stuck to its guns and converted what had been a white elementary school into a black school that began as a joint elementary and high school and then continued as a black high school. The school was created, McDonough 35 in 1917 and almost immediately after the creation of this black school or the conversion of a white school into a black school, the city essentially began tearing down

Stern, continued the surrounding neighborhood. At the time that the future of the school was being debated, there had been proposals for a passenger rail station next to the school that had initially been defeated. After it became a black school, that plan was revived, the rail station was built, new tracks running to it were built. That involved demolishing a significant amount of housing. There were rail sheds in the neighborhood that were expanded and resulted in the demolition of additional housing. Charity Hospital was nearby. It built a new tuberculosis ward that gobbled up almost an entire block of housing. That happened in 1929 and in that same year the city passed a comprehensive zoning ordinance and that zoning ordinance gave the lowest level protection to this area.

Chancellor Stern says that the story of McDonough 35 is interesting in part because even though it's one school in one neighborhood, it maps onto this larger history and set of processes not just in New Orleans but other places too.

Stern One of the things I attempt to do in the book and one of the reasons I wanted to look at this relationship between schooling and race and urban change over close to two centuries was to really be able to develop a sense of how much changed and how much stayed the same in relation to racial order and really the forms that white supremacy took over that period of time. One thing I found was there significant continuity in white supremacy. White people in New Orleans, and there are lots of reasons to see New Orleans as representative of what's happening in other places. White people maintained disproportionate power and control over resources, over government across this long historical period I'm looking at. One argument I make is that the shift from a residentially integrated city to a starkly divided city in a way that race maps onto the geography of the city, was a remarkable change that occurred during the 20th century and occurred across the country.

Chancellor And so, for Stern, part of what he wanted to do was to understand how and why this change came about. He says what he found was that the process of segregating the city was a dynamic process, but also was what he calls an improvisational one.

Stern And what I mean by that is there was sort of a give and take between African American residents who were seeking greater opportunity, greater resources within a starkly unequal society, and whites who held a disproportionate share of power. And often in attempts to preserve white supremacy, white residents, white policymakers were essentially refashioning the form that their supremacy took and the mechanisms they were using to maintain it. And so to give some examples of what this activism looked like, during the Jim Crow era, so as southern states were passing laws requiring segregation in pretty much every aspect of life, from schooling to public accommodations, southern states were also disenfranchising black people, through constitutional amendments, through laws, preventing -- denying them their right to vote. During this period which began roughly in the 1890s, you also see across the south growing disparities in school funding for black and white schools. School segregation had a history that largely predated the Jim Crow statutes that extended segregation to other parts of life. School segregation had a long history outside the south as well. But as southern states are seeking to create a firmer color line, they're dramatically increasing the funding disparities. And so you see often the case that black residents were paying more in taxes than they were actually getting back in funding for their children's education.

Chancellor Stern says a really clear example of this in New Orleans was that in 1900, the school board eliminated public education for black students beyond the 5th grade.

Stern And they did so, and this was representative of the time, in very -- they didn't hold any punches in saying why they were doing it. They literally wrote into the minutes that they eliminating education beyond fifth grade because they wanted to provide black students with the education that would fit them for their proper station in life economically and socially. Following the elimination of grades six and higher, black residents consistently pressed for the restoration of their grades. And often it was parents club, the sort forerunners to PTOs were called mothers clubs, based at individual schools that would come before the board and say, we need 6th grade. We have students who need to go to school.

Stern, continued And this was a really long process of gradually getting the initial grades back, getting 6th, getting 7th, getting 8th. But, by 1914, those grades had been restored, but there was still no black high school, so these mothers clubs along with an organization called the Colored Educational Alliance that brought together a lot of middle class black leaders, ministers, businessmen, teachers and school principals, a lot of them were women, who would come before the board and say 'the black community has huge needs. It's being denied opportunity. We need more facilities because our school facilities are overcrowded. We need a high school.' And it was in this context of leaders coming before the school board, talking about the black school in this section of the city called the third ward, this elementary school that was incredibly overcrowded, saying we need a new building for this, we also need a high school. This went on for a series of years and it would force the board in time to bow to pressure but often when policymakers were making concessions to African Americans, they were seeking to do so in ways that did not threaten the broader racial hierarchy or threaten white supremacy.

Chancellor As we've heard, Professor Stern says these processes weren't just taking place in New Orleans. But at the same time, we often think of New Orleans as a unique city and one with a unique geography and history, so I asked him how well these things he's talking about actually map onto other cities and metropolitan areas in the U.S.

Stern I kind of joke that writing about New Orleans is a blessing and a curse. It's a blessing because most people have positive associations with the city. They think of it as incredibly unique and different and like no other place in the country and so they're interested to read about it, which is great, because it means that people are going to hopefully have an interest. But it also creates this challenge of trying to say, well, this place maybe isn't as unique or exotic as it might seem from a distance. And that's certainly an argument that I make in the book, that for all of the apparent exoticism of New Orleans of having this French and Spanish colonial history and having a history of an essentially tripartite caste system of enslaved, free black, and whites, it's actually a quintessentially American city. I try to show that at several key moments in time. When I talk about the antebellum period, for instance, I talk about the founding of the public school system in New Orleans. In the 1840s when New Orleans founded its school system, it was the third largest city in nation. It was a banking center. It was the center of the cotton trade. Of the domestic slave trade. It was connected to these global networks of capitalist development. And so at that time, it's hard to say somehow New Orleans is different than the rest of the country. And much of the way that public education developed in New Orleans mirrored Boston where policymakers in New Orleans were actually writing to Horace Mann, kind of viewed as the founding father of public education, asking him for advice, following his plans, hiring the superintendent he recommended. But there were similarities in that the school system in New Orleans as it was founded was explicitly for whites only and in northern and Midwestern cities that were founding public school systems around the same time, they were typically either excluding or segregating African Americans. And so there was a role that race played in the initial development that mirrored other places.

Chancellor But Stern says that, especially as we move into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the South may have been unique in having explicit laws around segregation, but that the kinds of processes we're talking about weren't at all limited to the South.

Stern What we think of as Jim Crow is this oppressive social, political, and economic system -- it was really something that was national, particularly as African Americans moved from the south to northern cities during the great migration. African Americans faced intense housing discrimination, employment discrimination -- there were many jobs that were strictly off limits to African Americans in northern cities. And school systems became segregated, often in the absence of laws requiring segregation, often these systems became segregated in presence of laws that explicitly prohibited segregation, but school districts were making decisions about where to locate schools, how to draw attendance zones. And while I largely focus on New Orleans, draw specific comparisons between New Orleans and other cities. It would seem that the evidence I'm finding of this link between schooling and housing and schooling and urban planning more broadly would find corollaries in other cities. And there are scholars who have done work in cities like Nashville and Raleigh, Hartford, Connecticut for some of the periods of

Stern, continued time I'm looking at and are finding similarities in terms of the role that schools played in shaping urban landscape and bolstering and advancing residential segregation

Chancellor Professor Stern says that in thinking about this research, there are implications for American history and also for thinking about current policy.

Stern And so the implications for understanding American history are really that we need to really broaden our perspective when we're looking at the past and look at particularly the role that race has played in shaping American life over a really long period of time. I think rhetorically a lot of people recognize and will say, oh yeah, there's a history of slavery and discrimination and it's this sort of terrible legacy that we need to contend with, but oftentimes, that seems really, really distant. And so in looking at the processes that I do, over a long period of time, I'm hoping to show that we can't look at racial disparities as only a recent phenomenon or something that just sort of developed in a short period of time. This is something that developed over centuries and became reinforced and more and more deeply ingrained. And that I think then speaks to the policy implications, which is, there are not going to be quick fixes to addressing segregation within schools or within cities or wealth disparities between white people and African Americans because these are inequalities that have developed over such a long period of time and have been reinforced in so many different ways that we have to recognize just how deep the roots are.

Chancellor And Stern says that for current policy, he thinks the history he documents in his book can give us insights when we're considering issues involving the connection between schools, resources, and neighborhoods.

Stern And currently, one major thrust of reform, school reform has to do with school choice and with the idea that this connection between schools and communities should be severed. And the logic behind it initially sounds appealing. Policymakers look out and see, ok, there are stark geographic divisions within cities, within metropolitan areas and that impoverished communities often have schools that are struggling and students from those communities should be able to go to neighborhoods with better resources and better resourced schools. It may seem attractive, but the problems I see looking at that in the context of the history I've been examining is that it's essentially accepting segregation as something that is going to continue and something that's almost inevitable. Which is counter to the history showing that racial segregation and the disparity in resources between neighborhoods is not something that was inevitable, it was something that was created through policy and it took a lot of work to create it. I think we shouldn't take a defeatist approach and say, ah well, we're just going to have segregated cities, we're going to have disparities in resources between neighborhoods. But then the other implication is that I think cutting the tie between schools and neighborhoods is also sort of failing to recognize this long standing connection between schools and urban development and the way that schools have been used at various times to promote the development of communities and neighborhoods and resources. Unfortunately more often than not, schools have been used to direct resources to certain racialized groups, especially to people who are viewed as white while denying resources to people who are identified as black. But it, to me, suggests that schools can really be harnessed as one tool in conjunction with housing policy and health care policy and economic development and job growth to really build up neighborhoods.

Chancellor Thanks to Walter Stern for sharing his work with us. Again, his book is called *Race and Education in New Orleans: Creating the Segregated City*, and is available from the Louisiana State University Press. This podcast was supported as part of a grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation but its contents don't necessarily represent the opinions or policies of that Office, any other agency of the Federal government, or the Institute for Research on Poverty. To catch new episodes of the Poverty Research and Policy Podcast, you can subscribe on Apple Podcast, Stitcher, or Google Play Podcasts. You can also find all of our past episodes on the Institute for Research on Poverty website. Thanks for listening.

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