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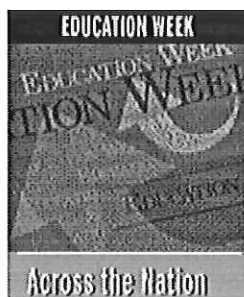
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NAACP Wrestles With Evolving Views On Desegregation

By Caroline Hendrie

Pittsburgh

Reflecting long-held ambivalence among African-Americans over the social costs of desegregating schools, one of the nation's foremost civil rights groups has been struggling to dispel confusion over where it stands on the issue.

The confusion arose after several media outlets--starting with *The New York Times* on June 23--reported that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was rethinking its longstanding support of busing and other mandatory measures aimed at integrating schools.

Citing remarks by the NAACP's chairwoman, Myrlie Evers-Williams, the reports suggested that the group would begin openly debating the question at its mid-July convention.

But then, as the convention kicked off here July 12, Ms. Evers-Williams denounced those accounts as "creative writing." She downplayed her earlier suggestions that the group would consider modifying its policy. And instead of a full-blown debate, the group held a forum at the convention titled "Why the NAACP is for Integration."

"Integration transforms racial hierarchy, it transforms people's thinking, it exposes the lies of white supremacy," Dennis Courtland Hayes, the NAACP's general counsel, said at the forum. "That's what integration does and that's why the NAACP is for it."

Still, there were signs that the group's leadership was taking at least tentative steps to allay criticism of its traditional stance, which has come from both within and without the 88-year-old organization.

Some critics want the group to de-emphasize the quest for more racially balanced schools--especially if it entails compulsory cross-town busing--and focus more on improving predominantly black schools.

Many veterans of bitterly fought battles to desegregate schools, meanwhile, are passionately opposed to any such shift.

Kweisi Mfume, the former Maryland congressman who took over as the NAACP's president last year, appeared to be trying to reconcile these viewpoints by stressing the need for "equity" and "equality of opportunity" for blacks.

"The days of having one answer and one solution are over in creating an educational process that is really equal," Mr. Mfume said in an interview. "The NAACP does not have the answer. There is no magic wand."

Assumptions Challenged

Even before the landmark 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*--which declared separate schools for blacks inherently unequal--blacks were keenly aware of the tradeoffs of forcing open the doors of all-white schools.

Many blacks remember the lost jobs and closed schools that accompanied the merger of formerly separate systems after the decision. There is also nostalgia among some for the sense of community and cultural affirmation they associate with all-black schools.

"We had some bad plans in the early days that shut down schools in black communities," Raymond C. Pierce, a deputy assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of Education's office for civil rights, said at last month's forum. "And the first people to lose their jobs were black people."

Today, such memories are helping fuel disenchantment with the legacy left by nearly a half-century of desegregation litigation. Many complain that the burden of busing has fallen disproportionately on African-Americans and that black parents are less able to become involved when their children attend schools far from home.

As a result, black leaders across the political spectrum--from conservative Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas to militant Afrocentrists--have questioned the bedrock assumption of such lawsuits: that black children are best served when educated with whites.

And black school leaders and parents have found themselves at odds with the NAACP and other civil rights activists as those groups continue to fight in court for busing and other locally unpopular measures.

Rumblings in the Ranks

As the group most associated with desegregation, the NAACP has not escaped this controversy within its own ranks.

In 1995, national leaders ousted local-branch presidents in Yonkers, N.Y., and Bergen County, N.J., who had argued that upgrading the majority-black schools in their communities was of greater urgency than pushing for integration in the face of white resistance.

Both men predicted in recent interviews that the dialogue on the issue would only accelerate within the NAACP.

"I'm not against integration," said Robert H. Robinson, the former president of the Bergen County chapter. "We're just trying to get them to work for quality education. That's the message that needs to come out."

That message does not differ dramatically from the one espoused by another leading civil rights group, the National Urban League.

Hugh B. Price, the league's president, says his local chapters must pick their fights, pushing for integration in districts where there are enough whites left to make it feasible, and focusing on improving academic performance where it is not.

"There are limits to the extent that you can engineer integration," Mr. Price said. "This is a matter of high principle that also has to be looked at through the prism of pragmatism."

Quentin Lawson, the executive director of the Washington-based National Alliance of Black School Educators, said his group also supports the twin goals of increasing integration and educational quality. "Those two must be like train tracks," he said.

Michael Sussman, a lawyer from Goshen, N.Y., who represents the NAACP in several desegregation cases around the country, expressed frustration at last month's forum that high-quality education had been set in opposition to desegregation. "These are not mutually exclusive goals," he said.

He and other speakers said desegregation suits often prove the best source of leverage for improving schools, and they urged naacp branches nationwide to renew their commitment to such cases.

That support is especially vital, they said, given the clear judicial trend toward releasing districts from court oversight.

"We've become lazy," Mr. Hayes said. "There's no substitute for you organizing your communities and showing your indignation."

On the Web

Read the full text of [Kweisi Mfume's speech](#) on the NAACP's Web site.

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