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The Trump Administration Is Closing Desegregation Cases. Racism Didn't Get the Memo.



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I had to read the headline twice. Not because I didn't understand it, but because it is 2026. The Justice Department announced this week that it is ending more than 50 long-running school-desegregation cases across the United States.

These are cases that were created to dismantle racially segregated school systems after Jim Crow. Some have remained under federal oversight for more than half a century. Seventy-two years after *Brown v. Board of Education* declared segregated public schools unconstitutional, we are apparently still having a national conversation about when the work of desegregation is officially finished. And maybe that is the story.

Not simply that the Trump administration is closing these cases. But that America keeps wanting to declare victory over racism while continuing to live inside structures racism helped build.

No, Trump Did Not Just "Legalize Segregation"

The administration has not repealed *Brown v. Board*, at least not yet. Schools cannot legally establish separate systems for Black and white children. The Justice Department is reviewing and terminating old federal desegregation cases and consent decrees once it concludes districts have achieved what courts call "unitary status"—meaning the district has sufficiently dismantled the remnants of its formerly segregated system.

Assistant Attorney General Harmeet Dhillon says decades-long federal supervision has become "onerous and outdated" and no longer reflects conditions in many classrooms. The administration argues that districts that have satisfied their obligations should regain local control and redirect resources away from compliance requirements. That is the administration's argument.

On its face, it seems reasonable to ask if a school district should remain under a federal court order forever. Probably not simply because it once operated segregated schools. But another question is much harder. How exactly do we decide when the consequences of segregation are over? Especially in a country still rotted in systemic racism.

Racism Has Never Required A "Whites Only" Sign to Survive

This is where America's conversations about race repeatedly become frustrating. We remain remarkably attached to the idea that racism counts only when somebody announces it. If nobody says, *Black children cannot attend this school,* then apparently race has disappeared from the equation.

Except racism learned to operate without signs decades ago. Neighborhood segregation affects where children live, and where children live determines where many of them attend school. Property values influence local tax bases

and educational resources. Housing discrimination accumulated over generations. Wealth accumulated differently across generations.

School boundaries, admissions policies, gifted programs, discipline practices, and transportation systems can all produce racial disparities without anybody standing at the schoolhouse door announcing, *"Black kids aren't allowed."* That is what people mean when they talk about structural racism. The system doesn't need an individual villain twirling his mustache. Sometimes yesterday's discriminatory rules create today's unequal starting points.

The Administration is Changing How Government Thinks About That Problem Too

This week's desegregation announcement is not occurring in isolation. The Trump administration has also been narrowing the federal government's approach to racial disparities in education. For decades, civil-rights enforcement operated partly on the understanding that discrimination does not always have to be intentional.

In other words, a seemingly neutral policy can still create substantially unequal outcomes across racial groups, which may prompt federal scrutiny. The administration has moved away from that philosophy. This summer, the Education Department rescinded a regulation allowing schools to examine racial disparities in outcomes — such as who receives access to advanced classes — as potential evidence of discrimination.

Supporters describe that shift as a return to equal treatment of individuals rather than race-conscious policymaking. Critics argue that it makes systemic discrimination harder to identify precisely because modern racial inequality frequently does not announce itself through explicitly discriminatory rules.

There lies the enormous philosophical divide. One side essentially asks, *are the rules racially neutral today? While the other asks: what did the old rules build, are we still living with the consequences of those rules, and are the old rules still very much shaping policy?* Those questions can produce very different answers.

We Are Obsessed With Declaring Racism Is Finished

America loves a finish line. Slavery ended. Check. Civil Rights Act. Check. Voting Rights Act. Check. *Brown v. Board.* Check. Black president. Huge check. Surely we're done now. Except history doesn't work like deleting an app from your phone.

Systems leave residue, especially when they are still very much in place and functioning. That said, you can go as far as to outlaw housing discrimination without instantaneously redistributing the wealth it prevented Black families from accumulating. You can integrate a school without immediately equalizing everything that generations of separate-and-unequal education created.

You can remove the racist law without removing every condition the racist law produced, and that is where the phrase "that was a long time ago" becomes so convenient, but woefully ignorant and myopic. Yes. Some of these desegregation cases are old.

So are the inequalities they were created to address. Yet, many of those inequalities still persist today. Age alone doesn't tell us whether the work is finished. Evidence does.

This Hits Differently After Thinking About Black Parents and Schools

I recently wrote about the impossible calculus many Black parents still perform when choosing schools. Do I prioritize racial representation, resources, academic rigor, community, or belonging? Do I send my Black child into a predominantly white institution because it has extraordinary resources and then work overtime to make sure she remains rooted in her identity?

Or do I prioritize a school where she sees herself everywhere, even if that institution has fewer resources? That should not be the equation. And yet for many families, some version of it remains real.

Which makes the idea that school desegregation is merely an antiquated problem from grainy black-and-white photographs feel disconnected from how families still experience education. Segregation today may not look like 1957. But just because it does not look exactly like Jim Crow does not mean we eliminated disparities Jim Crow helped create.

This Is Why "Mission Accomplished" Makes Me Nervous

Again, federal desegregation orders were never meant to exist forever. If a district has met the legal requirements to end court supervision, there is a legitimate legal process for determining that. But critics of the current approach worry that a broad push to close old cases could weaken a mechanism that historically required districts to show they had dismantled segregated systems rather than simply waiting for public attention to fade.

These decrees have addressed much more than which child sits beside whom. They have historically touched student assignments, faculty hiring, facilities, discipline, transportation, and how resources are distributed across schools. That isn't ancient history. That's infrastructure, and infrastructure is precisely how inequality survives without announcing itself.

Maybe The Most American Thing About Racism is How Badly We Want to Stop Talking About It

We change the vocabulary and laws. We change what respectable people are willing to say publicly. But then somebody points to a racial disparity, and immediately another conversation begins asking, *why are we still talking about race*?

Why can't we move on? *Why can't everybody simply be treated the same*? Because sometimes treating everyone the same after people were treated radically differently for generations simply freezes the consequences in place, and if we are being completely honest, many of the inequities that existed during Jim Crow are present today.

So Yes, I Keep Returning to The Year

I don't necessarily think nothing has changed since *Brown*. An enormous amount has changed. But we are not as far removed from racism as some are claiming us to be. The truth is that 72 years after the Supreme Court rejected legally segregated schools, we still haven't escaped the consequences of the system that required that ruling in the first place.

And maybe that is the uncomfortable lesson. Racism does not survive because America never changes. To some extent, America has changed. It survives partly because we repeatedly mistake progress for completion. We pass the law, remove the sign, close the case, and declare the problem solved.

Then act surprised when the architecture built during the discriminatory era is still standing around us. That is why these desegregation cases matter beyond the court docket. They force us to confront an uncomfortable question: How do you know when you've finished repairing something that took generations to build?

Maybe some of these districts have reached that point. Maybe federal supervision in particular cases truly has outlived its purpose. But if America wants to declare the era of school desegregation oversight finished, the measure cannot simply be that enough time has passed.

It has to be whether the work was actually done. Because racism does not disappear simply because we have grown tired of discussing it, and history does not become irrelevant just because the paperwork is old. But maybe that is not the point. Perhaps the plan was for racism to always be a central part of America's tapestry, and now the country has reached a place where it's no longer interested in hiding that fact.

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