

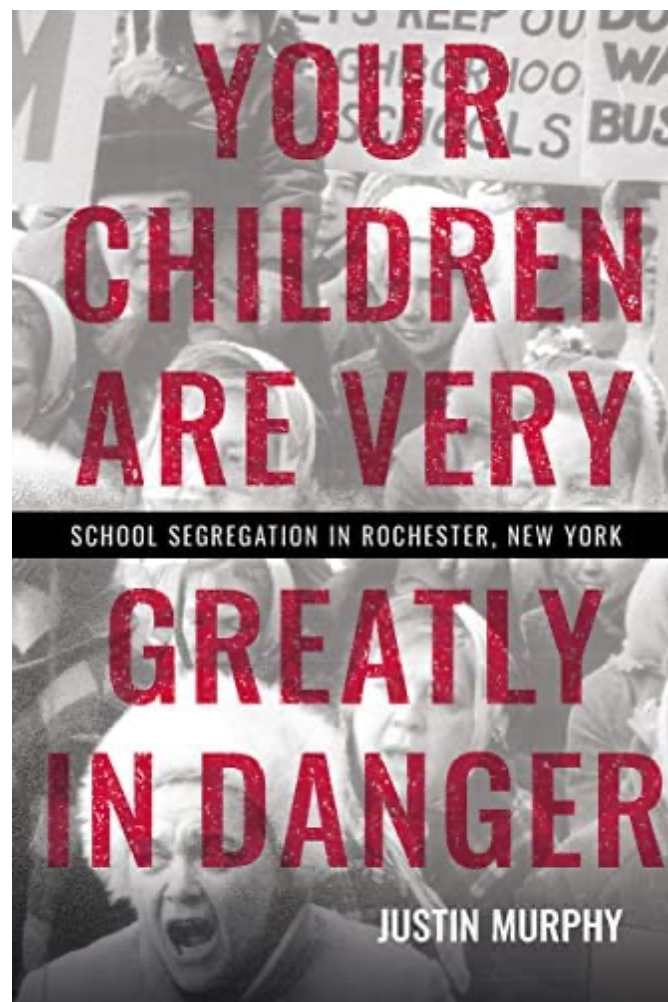
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Review

Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York

by Janet Zandy



JUSTIN MURPHY. YOUR CHILDREN ARE VERY GREATLY IN DANGER: SCHOOL SEGREGATION IN ROCHESTER, NEW YORK. ITHACA: CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2022.

Justin Murphy. *Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger: School Segregation in Rochester, New York.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022.

“no matter how hard we work, white people don’t want integration”¹

In “Words of a Native Son” (1964) James Baldwin urges his readers to shed their “moral apathy” and to see that “as long as my children face the future they face, and come to the ruin that they come to, your children are very greatly in danger too.”² Justin Murphy, an education reporter at Rochester’s *Democrat and Chronicle*, draws on Baldwin’s language as title for his important historical account of education in the city of Rochester, New York, where 91% of the approximately 23,000 students currently enrolled are considered “non-white” and 89% are “economically disadvantaged.” How did Rochester, site of Frederick Douglass’s home and newspaper, *North Star*, and of Susan B. Anthony’s suffrage campaign, become *de facto* segregated by race and class? Today, in daily lived experience, Rochester is closer to *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) than *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). Justin Murphy provides documented, historical context, decade after decade, of how, in his words, Rochester “slouched away” from the standard of *Brown* to its current apartheid state (my words).

Murphy begins in the present at Anna Murray Douglass Academy School 12, the site where Douglass lived with his family until his house was burned down in 1872. He cites Douglass’s prescient words: “Let colored children be educated and grow up side by side with white children . . . and it will require a powerful agent to convert them into enemies” (*North Star*, 1848, 3). That’s the crux of Baldwin’s and Murphy’s thesis—that integration benefits whites as well as blacks. Yet, that’s an argument too many whites did not want to hear—and still don’t. White resistance to integration has been as consistent as Black activism for equal educational opportunities.

This is a detailed case study which can be usefully juxtaposed with education policies and outcomes in other medium sized U.S. cities. Murphy skillfully narrates multiple shifts—political, judicial, demographic, economic—that shaped the race and class circumstances of Rochester’s educational system. Some of these, such as the postwar Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North, are comparable to those of other cities. Blacks seeking better opportunities left their southern rural homes and joined kin and established Black families in the North. Rochester’s regional farms and orchards also drew migrant farm workers who faced harsh health and working conditions (and still do). In Rochester, though, employment and residential discrimination was more specific. Major Rochester corporations—Eastman Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch and Lomb—almost never hired Blacks until the pressure of the Civil Rights movement. George Eastman’s philanthropy helped established Rochester’s major university, its medical

center, Eastman School of Music, and major art gallery. Eastman financially contributed to Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and the eugenics movement. His Black valet, Solomon Young, told his niece Alice Young, “George Eastman was a lot of good things, but it was never his intent that African-Americans would be working in a factory in Rochester” (46). Alice Young would become the first Black principal in the city of Rochester school district.

Employment was an obstacle and so was (and is) housing. Murphy writes about the self-perpetuating relationship between housing and school discrimination. Ghettos are built through discriminatory housing policies orchestrated by realtors, banks, landlords, and home owners. Blacks faced limited rental choices, and those were often decrepit and over-priced. In the 1940s and 50s “red lining,” deed restrictions and racial covenants (supported by the Rochester Catholic Diocese and Eastman Kodak), and coded advertisements were the structural impediments that Black would-be home owners faced in addition to blatant racial epithets and slurs.³

Murphy draws another distinction by questioning whether the Rochester City School District (RCS D) assumed responsibility for proactively resisting residential discriminatory practices in its placement procedures. He cites evidence, through the 1940s and into the early 60s, that school board and district administration decisions regarding the location of schools, newly built and older, and their assigned student populations, reinforced housing discrimination that determined segregated schools (94-96).

The Supreme Court landmark decision in favor of Linda Brown and other plaintiffs (*Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* on May 17, 1954) named, through Chief Justice Earl Warren’s opinion, the psychological damage school segregation does to “the hearts and minds” of Black children. The Court’s 1955 follow-up decision directed school districts to implement “with all deliberate speed” desegregation plans (82). This decision, however, did not recognize James Baldwin’s observation a decade later that segregation damages white people as well. By the early 1960s Northern school districts could no longer assume that integration was just a problem for the South. In Rochester evidentiary studies revealed through the organizing skills of Walter Cooper (who earned a PhD in chemistry from the University of Rochester and chaired NAACP’s education committee) how “majority Black schools often received the least funding” and how green (\$) follows white (89). True, segregated neighborhoods undergird segregated schools, but that, as Murphy deftly shows, is not the whole story.

Supported by a legal team from the NAACP to address segregation practices in the city school district, a lawsuit was filed in May 1962. *Aikens* (alphabetical listing of first child’s name) v. *Board of Education of Rochester, New York*, represented twenty-two children from ten families, including white families, and asserted (presaging Baldwin) “that white children’s constitutional rights were being violated by being kept separate from Black children, as well as the converse” (89). Over the years, the lawsuit floundered and, eventually, for several reasons, including financial support, the NAACP decided not to pursue it against the wishes of the litigants. What difference it would have made is unclear.

What is clear, as documented in Murphy's dense chapters, is that subsequent efforts to ameliorate *de facto* segregation, some with more likely efficacy than others, met opposition at almost every turn. Superintendent Herman Goldberg (tenure, 1963-1969), pressured by angry white parents on one hand and increasingly militant Black leaders on the other, tried to hew a middle ground of slow change through voluntary (key word) open enrollment efforts. But Black parents were discouraged from sending their children to schools outside their neighborhoods by whites driving cars through their streets with intended intimidating messages.

Then on July 24, 1964 a community outdoor party went awry, rumors spread, police arrived with dogs, violence erupted in other Black neighborhoods, and after three nights and the arrival of the National Guard, the riot/rebellion ended. Four people died and 900 were arrested, 86% of those Black and Puerto Rican (106). In a context of increasing Black Power militancy, a group of Protestant clergy brought organizer Saul Alinsky to town. Alinsky assessed Rochester "as probably the most extreme example of benevolent paternalism in the country" (107). A year later Rev. Franklin Florence formed and led a more assertive organization, FIGHT, and agitated for jobs, focusing on the most dominant company, Eastman Kodak. Florence also fought for integrated schools and agreed with the NAACP that school districts need to recruit and hire more Black teachers and produce a culturally and historically informed curriculum about race.

Murphy traces the Sisyphean efforts by Superintendent Herman Goldberg and Black leaders to desegregate Rochester schools from May 1962 to June 1972. Reorganization plans and other incentives faced opposition from a splinter group, United Schools Association, led by anti-busing, anti-desegregation conservative Louis Cerulli, a physician. There is a city school named after him, go figure. A rare, short-lived opening occurred in February 1971 when a Democratic controlled school board passed a resolution calling for a districtwide reorganization intended to desegregate schools. It involved school busing (129). By the end of that school year, Black students headed for Charlotte Junior High School had to crouch down in their school bus to avoid the rocks thrown by whites hiding in cemeteries along the bus route.

In "From Charlotte to Milliken," Murphy documents the violence, most often instigated by white parents, that spread to students, affected teacher safety, and triggered racial fights. As one school sentry reported, "the kids will be great friends, then all of a sudden parents come down and you don't recognize the kids" (134). Fear generates more fear and the benefits, tangible and intangible, of integration are hard to recognize (143). "There were parents—perfectly nice, decent, good people—throwing rocks at school buses," recalled a teacher at the time (149). I can imagine Murphy's challenge in balancing his reportorial voice with the need to shape a narrative relevant to the present. He concludes this chapter with reference to the right-swing of Nixon's America and the Supreme Court case, *Milliken v. Bradley*, where Nixon-appointed judges ruled in favor of those opposing a plan of "intracity" desegregation. Murphy sees this ruling as the "sunset" of the Civil Rights era, and quotes some of Thurgood Marshall's dissent: "Desegregation is not and was

never expected to be an easy task. Racial attitudes ingrained in our Nation's childhood and adolescence are not quickly thrown aside in its middle years . . ." (155).

What is the solution to the actuality of school segregation? Murphy details various versions of "Intracity" or metropolitan school proposals, the quagmire of funding, the many walls of resistance, and the few islands of support for desegregated schooling. One of the few remaining ideas is the Urban-Suburban Program, ideally a two-way exchange. In actuality, a few select city students attend primarily white suburban schools. By the mid 1980s what was left of Civil Rights consciousness shifted to technocratic methods and arguments for "accountability." Murphy writes, "the fundamental question of whether to integrate schools or to fix them in place has been settled decisively. Every new current in education reform—magnet schools, charter schools, standardized testing, governance changes—falls into the latter paradigm. . . . The logic of *Brown* is forgotten; a disavowal of desegregation is implicit in local, state, and federal education policy" (205-206).⁴ The current mayor Malik Evans, a graduate of Wilson Magnet High School and the University of Rochester, a banker, school board member, city councilman, and father, supports metropolitan education reforms and targeted desegregation measures, but nevertheless, feels such changes are "never going to happen" (239).

And yet, Murphy finds hope in the grass roots efforts of students through an initiative called Roc 2 Change, regional gatherings of high school students meeting to discuss antiracist strategies. He concludes with "Three Steps Toward Change": the writing of a foundational report leading to the development of a comprehension metropolitan shift in school systems—perhaps recommending a federation of school districts and moving money revenues rather than students; an action plan to build on and more equitably design the current Urban-Suburban program, including employing a lottery system rather than drafting a few select students by district administrators, and providing bus transportation for students' after school activities and as means for city parents to visit suburban schools; and "intensive anti-racism education for children and adults in all Rochester-area school districts," with the understanding that segregation harms everyone (237). How an anti-racism curriculum is developed is a large matter for another purview. It is certainly not about making little white kids feel guilty, as Baldwin understood. Rather, turning to the language of Richard Wright in his *12 Million Black Voices*, it involves seeing the intersection of oppressive race/class forces, what Wright called the "Lords of the Land" and the "Bosses of the Buildings."⁵ Many years ago, I asked Manning Marable about the difference between ethnic workers' struggles and black struggles. As I remember, he said, "imagine being forced to hold a rope; for whites it burns the hand, for blacks it cuts the flesh."

If James Baldwin were writing today, I wonder if he would still use the language of "moral apathy" as he did in 1964. The word *apathy* suggests an indifference to what is known, but does not account for the will to **not** know, a determined ignorance, an agnosis, an always present American anti-intellectualism that now manifests itself in grievance, white supremacy, and lies. In "A Talk to

Teachers" (1963) Baldwin reminds us that "the whole process of education occurs within a social framework and is designed to perpetuate the aims of society" and "what passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors" and "it is your responsibility to change society if you think of yourself as an educated person" (678-686).⁶ *Your Children Are Very Greatly in Danger*" is one important effort to foster that crucial change.

Notes

1. Conclusion reached in 1969 by Reecy Davis, organizer of United Federation of Inner-City Parents, Rochester, NY, 142.
2. *James Baldwin, Collected Essays*, edited by Toni Morrison, New York: The Library of America, 1998, 713.
3. A personal aside—I have lived in the city of Rochester for over fifty years. My neighborhood was integrated when we moved in and still is. I've wondered why it wasn't redlined as the nearby suburb was. I speculate that the Jewish original owners of homes in this neighborhood were willing to sell to Black people, perhaps because they understood the wrong of discrimination. Perhaps a study for another book.
4. In a frontpage article on June 15, 2022, Justin Murphy reports on the closing of the Rochester City School District's Leadership Academy for Young Men after 11 years. He lists "inconsistent resources and attention from RCSD; overwhelming levels of student need and trauma, including poverty; and the COVID-19 pandemic" as factors affecting the school's demise. The originating ethos of structure, mentorship, community,

and relevant pedagogy collapsed over the years as students were assigned to the school rather than self-selecting it, as school leaders faced a rapid turnover of RCSD administrators (eight different administrators over eight years), and as a third of students have disabilities and ninety-four percent are considered economically disadvantaged, as graduation rates decreased (60% for male students) and fewer than half the students got passing grades on Regents exams in 2019.

5. Richard Wright (text), Edwin Rosskam (photo direction) *12 Million Black Voices*, New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1949, 1988.
6. *James Baldwin Collected Essays*. Regarding teachers, I wish there had been more space given to the voices of teachers in the city school district, especially across generations and geographic backgrounds.

Janet Zandy is emerita professor from Rochester Institute of Technology. Her books include *Hands: Physical Labor, Class, and Cultural Work*; *Calling Home: Working-Class Women's Writings*; *Liberating Memory: Our Work and Our Working-Class Consciousness*; *What We Hold in Common: An Introduction to Working-Class Studies*; *The Oxford Anthology of American Working-Class Literature* (co-edited with Nicholas Coles); and *Unfinished Stories: The Narrative Photography of Hansel Mieth and Marion Palfi*. Her essay, "Mapping Working-Class Art," is included in *Routledge International Handbook of Working-Class Studies*. She is currently writing a book on class, art making, and democracy.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com/).