



Department of Justice

PS
668
.K36

ADDRESS

BY

ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY

BEFORE

YOUNG ISRAEL OF PELHAM PARKWAY

CONCOURSE PLAZA HOTEL
NEW YORK CITY

MAY 20, 1964

It is ten years, almost to the day, since the Supreme Court of the United States asked the historic question, "Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race...deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities?"

The Court's answer was simple, but resounding: "We believe that it does."

The nation has traveled a long and difficult road since then. Little Rock; Clinton, Tennessee; New Orleans; Oxford, Mississippi; Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, Alabama -- all testify to the length and difficulty of the road.

But there also have been quieter successes. A number of other communities, Atlanta, Chattanooga, and Dallas, for example, have met the wrenching change of desegregating schools with good faith and with order. And, to their great credit some of the communities first troubled by disorder are now making progress with responsibility and calm.

Yet, the bulk of the problem remains. Less than 2 per cent of the Negro children in the South are in schools with white children. More than 1,800 of the 2,256 bi-racial school districts in the South remain totally segregated.

These figures reflect the depth of the problem. It will require new social attitudes and new laws to solve. The pending Civil Rights bill alone cannot provide the solution, for there is no single solution. But it is an essential step and it will be of great assistance.

In the meantime, those of us in other parts of the country have our own kind of school discrimination to face up to and in many ways it is a more difficult problem in Boston or Chicago or New York than it is in the South.

"It does no good," President Kennedy said a year ago in California, "to say that segregation in education is the business of another state. It is the business of our country. These young, uneducated boys and girls know no state boundaries...They are your citizens as well as citizens of this country."

But even after we acknowledge the breadth of both the problem, and the responsibility, we run the risk of laying too much stress on only the first word in the phrase "desegregated education." By so doing, we obscure the importance of the quality of education.

Desegregation of schools does not automatically transform them into better schools. It is only a step. The larger goal is to see that the education of our youth is not merely desegregated, but that it is excellent. And the place to start is in schools which for too long have been separate, or unequal, or inadequate.

There is little need to proclaim the necessity of education to an audience whose ancestors have been teaching that necessity to the world for fifty centuries. But it is relevant to observe how painfully the lack of education can affect the life of an American citizen today.

There are already more than 4,000,000 Americans seeking employment and unable to find it. As our society becomes more complex, their search becomes harder. A recent business survey disclosed that many companies now will not hire persons even for assembly line jobs unless they have high school diplomas. The companies are willing to pay more, but they want better workers.

The rate of unemployment among those who have graduated from college is 1.4 percent. The rate among those who did not finish high school is six times higher -- 8.1 percent.

At present, automation is eliminating more than 4,000 jobs a day -- precisely the kind of jobs which unskilled or semi-skilled people can fill. Approximately ten percent of the work force today is employed in unskilled jobs. By 1970, the figure will be down to five percent.

In short, a more direct relationship between education and employment exists in modern America than ever before. A very real cycle of ignorance and poverty is at work throughout our country.

Not long ago, I visited a rural hollow of despair in West Virginia where nearly all of the men were unemployed. Many of the children had never known their fathers to have a job. Many had never known either of their parents to have been to high school. It was discouraging to learn -- but it could not be surprising -- that the school dropout rate among these children is 95 percent.

Similar observations could be made about city children here and across the country, where second and third generations are undereducated, unemployed and on relief. A recent nationwide study showed that more than half of the men between 35 and 44 who did not finish high school were sons of men who did not finish grade school.

The lesson of these facts, rural and urban, is clear: We must do a better job of educating our youth, particularly those with built-in handicaps of race, or poverty, or both. As Secretary Wirtz has observed, "There probably won't be full employment until we make education our number one industry."

When I say we must do particularly well for the socially handicapped, I do not call for favoritism or preference. To educate the undereducated more does not mean we need educate our other children less. But it does mean we recognize that the American pledge of equal opportunity is meaningless without equal preparation.

There is no question that we have the skills and the resources to do so. The federal government is seeking to stimulate action on behalf of socially handicapped youth throughout the country.

The poverty legislation proposed by President Johnson includes a \$150,000,000 work-training program for teenage students and an extensive experiment in remedial reading to help young people master the skill which is so fundamental to all other learning.

The President's Committee on Juvenile Delinquency and Youth Crime already is helping establish demonstration projects to illustrate what can be done by local authorities, in a number of cities.

Here in New York, on the lower east side and in Harlem, programs are now underway to rescue boys and girls from the discouraging cycle of poverty and lack of education.

We--federal, state and city officials--have found that much can be done for children who must rely on their communities for the stimulation and education that cannot come from their homes.

We have found that much more must be done for these children--like those in Harlem who, when they reach the eighth grade, are two and a half years behind the city average in reading ability.

Neither the problems nor our capacity for solving them are limited to urban, metropolitan areas. In Prince Edward County, Virginia, 1,700 Negro children are attending school for the first time since public schools were closed there in 1959 to avoid desegregation. They are attending a free school system established last fall through the efforts of President Kennedy and state and local leaders.

I wish you could have been with me when we visited Prince Edward County not long ago and heard the Negro children, who had been deprived of education for four years, sing "America, the Beautiful." For schoolchildren to sing patriotic songs elsewhere would be unremarkable. But what should be understood is that when the free schools opened in Prince Edward last September, only one child could even recognize the national anthem. And he identified it as "the baseball song."

The latest test scores taken at the free schools demonstrate that their students have gained literacy skills in the past year at twice the national average. In one year of excellent education, most of the students will make up for two of the four years they lost. A few have even surpassed the level they would have reached in public school.

Whatever the success of such individual projects, however, it should be plain that the federal government's role can only be to help. Its efforts can only be demonstrations. For the sample solutions to have meaning, citizens everywhere must understand the common problem. They must initiate and support efforts in their own communities -- and they must participate in such efforts themselves.

Every week in Minneapolis, for example, the Council of Jewish Women takes a hundred underprivileged school children on field trips, or helps them to put on plays, or to build toy telephone networks, or other activities related to their school studies.

Every week in New York, Public Education Association volunteers spend three hours--or more-- with 11,000 public school students who need help in reading, or learning English, or other subjects. One teacher observed that in a period of months, these children have gained years of reading skill.

These examples show us what it is possible to do. They show us that we do not need to abandon our children to the sullen world of the hollow or the slum. They show us that education can and must be the vehicle out of hopelessness.

When our forbears--yours and mine--came to America, they came because this country promised them something. It promised them an opportunity, nourished by education, not merely to grind for a bare living, but to strive for a good life.

Now the question is whether the America of today still offers that opportunity to its citizens. Now the question is, are we going to give these children of the hollow and the slum the education and the support they must have to make that opportunity mean something?

Our failure to provide adequate answers to those questions will not be a mere failure of conscience or charity. It will be a failure within our society. We develop the kind of citizens we deserve. If a large number of our children grow up into frustration and poverty, we must expect to pay the price.

As Thomas Jefferson observed, 150 years ago, "If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

Education can provide us with the means. It can be the means to a job and a share in our unparalleled wealth. It can be a means to the solution of some of our most pressing social problems -- of race, of poverty, or crime.

But let us recognize that education also should be a means to more than vocational skills or physical comfort. The desegregation of education, the quality of education -- these can have ultimate meaning only as they can help to elevate the spirit of man.

Lord Tweedsmuir once wrote that civilization is "something more than the cushioned life made possible by science." Civilization must provide, he wrote, for "a soul to develop, a mind which could rejoice in the things of the mind, an impulse towards spiritual perfection."

It is this spirit which has motivated the Jewish people through centuries of physical duress. It is this spirit which has made America not merely a political experiment, but an enduring dream. With energy and optimism, let us work today to release that spirit for every citizen, to prove the worth of the experiment, and to enrich anew the American dream.