

Diversity at the crossroads: How does it pass through Hampton Roads?

*By Kimberly Dunbar
Communications Specialist
Cambridge College*

Should race matter when deciding which school a student gets to attend? Some people seem to think so.

For those who stand by the saying “history repeats itself,” the following case is a prime example of such a phenomenon. Recently, there have been Supreme Court hearings and debates in Seattle and Louisville arguing whether or not it is right to place a child in a different school because of his or her race in an attempt to bring more diversity to these schools.

In her recent ABCNews.com article, “High Court to Hear School Diversity Case,” Nancy Benac said that these challenges “could prove among the most significant K-12 desegregation cases since the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 that banned racial segregation in public schools.”

While these hearings are specific to these two cities, the effects of the issue are being felt all around the country. In the Hampton Roads region, the schools have their own way of dealing with diversity.

In the 1980’s, the Hampton Roads region got rid of cross-town busing, something Marian Flickinger, a former teacher and current President of the Norfolk Federation of Teachers, and her colleagues were against. Flickinger, who started teaching in 1970, the first year of school integration, is serving her 25th year as the President of the Norfolk Federation of Teachers. Flickinger says at that point in time, when the busing stopped, the school systems were not equal; the school supplies and the quality of education were not treated the same. Flickinger says that the situation has improved and the resources at the schools are now more equal.

While the differences in education quality have gotten smaller, so have the opportunities for understanding diversity. Flickinger is afraid that students no longer get to experience the actual understanding of cultures and prejudices when they do not co-exist together in school. “We are all human beings, we just happen to have different skin colors,” she says. “They can learn about prejudices at home, but when they are around each other they are able to learn on their own that these prejudices aren’t true.”

Flickinger says that the region has functions that bring the different schools together, giving the students a chance to see each other and interact on a regular basis, giving them greater exposure to diversity. However, Flickinger doesn’t think that these get-togethers compare to learning in a diverse school atmosphere.

“It’s not the same as working and playing together all day,” she says.

Dr. Ella Benson, a professor and Assistant Director at the Cambridge College Chesapeake Regional Center thinks that diversity in a classroom enriches a student's educational experience. "At Cambridge College, we really want to give students as well rounded an education as possible," says Dr. Benson. "We bring all areas and walks of life together. Students start to develop relationships outside the program and they continue to develop and understand each other, which is an experience they wouldn't otherwise have."

Founded in 1971 by a Harvard educated teacher, Cambridge College, with its main campus in Cambridge, Massachusetts is a regionally accredited private academically excellent, non-profit institution dedicated to providing academically excellent, time-efficient, and cost-effective higher education for a diverse population of working adults for whom those opportunities may have been limited or denied. In addition to the Chesapeake and Cambridge campuses, the institution has five other regional centers—Springfield (MA), Lawrence (MA), Ontario (CA), Augusta (GA), and one in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

While all Cambridge College regional centers boast diverse atmospheres, the Chesapeake campus, which is the largest regional center with over 700 students, is one of the most ethnically diverse with nearly a 60% African-American/ Non-Hispanic student population. Four hundred of the nearly 600 students who attend the Chesapeake regional center are studying in the field of Education earning a masters or higher degree.

While busing students enables diversity, assists with understanding prejudices, and fuels respect for another person's culture, Flickinger says there are some advantages to staying close to home. "Parental involvement is so important," she reasons. When the students were spread across the town and districts, it posed problems for parents and guardians to get involved. Some did not have vehicles and others had a hard time making meetings or events for some reason or another. With students attending schools close to their community, it makes it easier for parents and guardians to keep on track with their child's education.

"I would love to see if this has made a difference in the amount of involvement," says Flickinger. "If it has, then [not busing] has become a good thing."

While the push for the integration program is the government's attempt at adding diversity to the school systems, some are wondering how far the government will go, or if they should even be involved. Flickinger thinks that as long as Hampton Roads continues to move along, making sure cultural diversity is had within the schools and the communities, there should not be a need for the government to get involved.

As the issue of school integration program gets heated in Seattle and Louisville, is there a chance that cross-town transportation for students has a possibility of returning to the Hampton Roads region? Flickinger does not think so, but agrees there is always a chance.

“I’m not going to be noble and say no,” she says. “You can never say anything is gone for good. What is old is made new somehow.”

This article appeared in the January/February issue of Tidewater Teacher magazine.

Sources Consulted:

Benac, Nancy (2006). *High Court to Hear School Diversity Case* Retrieved December 11, 2006, from <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics>

Debate Over Segregation in Schools to Hit Supreme Court Today Retrieved December 11, 2006, from <http://abcnews.com/GMA>
