

## Racial Healing Begins By Admitting Our Schools Are Segregated - *NJ.com*

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Our state and nation have been devastated by the combined anguish caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and by the ruthless killing of George Floyd while in the custody of Minneapolis police officers. Both have disproportionately affected Black Americans. But there is a profound difference between these two events. The pandemic is the first of its kind in over 100 years. The murder of George Floyd is only the latest in a mind-numbing sequence of unjustified killings of Black men and women in the custody of white police officers.

The frequent recurrence of those killings has galvanized the public into demanding specific and systemic reforms in two critical areas: ending police violence toward Black citizens, and adopting policies to mitigate and heal the racial division in America that has persisted since our founding. This time the public will not accept bromides like “We have to do better” from police chiefs, mayors, governors and Congress. Now is the time for us to act, and to act promptly and firmly for both the short and long term.

Attorney General Grewal’s recent announcement of a three-pronged initiative to address police misconduct looks like a step in the right direction toward increased police accountability. He proposed a statewide database to track use of force by police officers so officers who are persistent offenders, like former Minneapolis cop Derek Chauvin, can be identified and removed. He also proposed the creation of a licensing system for police officers and committed to promptly revising the state’s policy on use of force by police. The Attorney General also should be supporting – instead of opposing – Newark’s community-based effort to implement a Civilian Review Board.

But those proposals do not address the deeper racial divide that persists nationwide – and in New Jersey – that creates a separation and an alienation among our Black, Latinx and white people. One reason for that alienation is that our state's discriminatory housing policies have segregated Black and Latinx citizens in our cities. Housing in most suburban communities is unaffordable yet there are few jobs or services in those communities.

Even more alienating are our school attendance laws and policies, which require students to attend schools in their district of residence. Because those districts are themselves segregated, New Jersey – shamefully – has one of the most severely segregated public-school systems in the entire country. Approximately 275,000 Black and Latinx students attend public schools that are more than 90% non-white. Because of that intense segregation, thousands of our children will never have the opportunity to learn, socialize, engage in athletics, or interact with children from racial backgrounds different from their own. Decades of confirmed research has demonstrated that children of all races who attend schools that are diverse do better academically, attend and graduate high school and college at higher rates, and have far more significant and positive interactions with people of different races and ethnicities throughout their lives.

As the attorney general – and the governor – are well aware, there is a lawsuit, *Latino Action Network v. New Jersey*, filed in May 2018 on the 64th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*, that is pending now in the Superior Court of New Jersey and is stalled because the state is unwilling to admit a fact that is undeniable – that New Jersey public schools are unconstitutionally segregated. The state wants the plaintiffs to prove at a trial what everyone – based on the state's own data – knows to be true: that New Jersey's Constitution prohibits public school segregation and that our public schools, in violation of the Constitution, are terribly segregated. Because the state, through the attorney general, refuses to concede this irrefutable fact, and has been aggressively litigating that which should be conceded, the lawsuit may not be resolved for many years.

But in this critical moment in which the entire nation is focused on our racial divisions, the governor and the attorney general could take a giant step toward healing those divisions in our state by ending the denials that are delaying the lawsuit and admitting in court what everyone involved in the litigation already knows – that our state's schools are so badly segregated that our children are prevented from learning and interacting with children from backgrounds different from their own. That admission would accelerate the lawsuit into the remedy phase in which the lawyers and experts on both sides – with input from our citizens and legislature – could work out and adopt the remedial steps that would bridge the racial divide.

That action by the governor and the attorney general would be a powerful acknowledgment that this moment in our history is different, that we are at a crossroads, and that a highly effective means of bridging the racial gap for the longterm is to allow all our children to grow up and learn together. That recognition would send a powerful message – not only to Minnesota, the residence of George Floyd, which is facing its own challenge in its courts to a claim of unconstitutional school segregation – but to the entire nation.

These are extraordinary times. They call for extraordinary courage and vision. I would ask the governor and the attorney general to demonstrate that courage and vision now.

