



## **Addicted to compulsion**

By Jim Waters

A colleague describes school officials who use force rather than choice to achieve racial diversity in schools as being “addicted to compulsion.”

Reaction by Jefferson County Public Schools officials to last week’s U.S. Supreme Court ruling that put a smack-down on the district’s racially based student-assignment plan reveals that an addiction to such compulsion exists in Kentucky’s largest school district.

As with most addictions, Jefferson County’s obsession with protecting the status quo is costly. In 2006, the district spent approximately \$80 million of its \$900-million budget just to keep its buses running. Some children must ride a bus more than an hour each way to get to schools that don’t perform nearly as well as schools closer to their home – simply because of their skin color.

Like addicts willing to do anything to get a fix, JCPS officials seem determined to control the district’s students and their parents — the people they should serve.

One of those people is Crystal Meredith, a parent behind the High Court case. Meredith didn’t plan on going to court. She just wanted to get the best education for her son.

But the school district, hooked on using bureaucratic force to achieve diversity (rather than improving academic results for its minority students), told her, “You will send your child to the school we tell you.” End of story.

Fortunately, Meredith didn’t accept this nonsense. She fought her way to the highest court – and defeated a school system overdosing on its own obstinacy.

The argument offered by JCPS officials in favor of their antiquated policies resembles that of addicts who claim dependence helps them cope. So to, school bureaucracies insist that coercive, quota-driven policies denying parents a real choice help officials cope with their misconstrued notion of diversity.

I don’t question the importance of diversity in schools. A quality education includes exposure to a variety of cultures, ethnic backgrounds and points of view. Children benefit from integration. All of us do.

But the court concluded that Jefferson County’s racial profiling of its students crosses the line. It said the district needs a balanced – more diverse, if you will – approach.

Denying parents a choice in the name of diversity sends this message: “We can’t trust parents to do the right thing for their children. If we do trust them, schools will overdose on segregation again. It’ll be the 1950s all over with separate schools for blacks and whites. Rosa Parks, God rest her soul, will again be forced to the back of the bus, and black children will be denied quality educational opportunities.”

Just like most addicts' substance abuse results in paranoid views of life, so school districts with "policy abuse" display widespread paranoia about giving parents too much power.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the detox clinic.

You find that when other urban areas such as Milwaukee began offering parental choice (quite different from Louisville's district-controlled "managed" choice), achievement gaps narrowed, property values rose and families returned to the inner city.

JCPS officials maintain denial worthy of any stubborn addict. Following the Supreme Court ruling, Sheldon Berman, JCPS superintendent, spun faster than a junkie on a bad trip.

Berman first told reporters that it's "unrealistic" to expect the district to adjust to the law during the upcoming school year. But then he displayed an "aw-shucks" moment in which he said that "most students get to go to the school that they choose" and "I don't think this is going to have a major impact."

I wanted to ask Berman this: "If it doesn't have any major impact, why not just allow affected parents to decide for this year which school their children would attend?"

However, Rosie, who answered the phone in the JCPS office on Monday, told me Berman was "unavailable" for the week. Meanwhile, it looks like JCPS parents won't have a real choice option for a lot longer than that.

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