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“Why Are We Silent?”
Remarks of Commissioner John B. King, Jr.
Brown v. Board of Education 60th Anniversary Event
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Good afternoon and thank you all for being here. I want to especially thank the Rockefeller Institute for hosting us, Assemblyman Camara for his warm introduction, and Deputy Commissioner Sharon Cates-Williams for lending her beautiful voice to this event.

I want to begin by asking a question. Why are we silent? Why are we silent when just 58 percent of African-American and Latino students graduate from high school compared to 86 percent of White students?

Why are we silent when just 15 percent of African-American and Latino students graduate from high school in New York State ready to do college-level coursework compared to nearly 50 percent of White students?

And why are we silent when a majority of students from wealthy families graduate from college, but less than 10 percent of students from poor families do?

I want us all to ponder that question -- as we come together today to celebrate an idea that is at the center of everything that America stands for. It's in our founding documents – it's in our laws – and it's in our hearts.

This idea inspired Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks. It inspired exceptional people like Jackie Robinson, Thurgood Marshall, Mae Jemison, Justice Sotomayor, and President Barack Obama to break through barriers and do things that people of color had never done before.

It gave strength and courage to so many people facing grave threats from ignorance and hatred. So many willingly put their lives on the line because this idea was so powerful and so inspiring.

This idea is equality. Equality is central to our identity as Americans. It's made our country a place where people of every race and color and religion and background could maximize their talents and contribute.

It's America at its best, and all of us – in one way or another – have benefitted from America's commitment to equality. For some of us – if not all of us – doors have opened, opportunity has presented itself, and we have seized the day.

But for all its power as an idea, equality remains elusive for far too many people of color in New York and across the country. None of us can fully escape the seeping sense of unfairness that conflicts with the fundamental values of our society.

Almost every person of color has felt the sting of discrimination at some point in his or her life. We have all developed ways to cope with it: sometimes we ignore it; sometimes we confront it in emotional ways.

But sometimes – inspired by the examples of generations of freedom fighters -- we get organized and we change things for the better.

That's what happened 63 years ago when Oliver Brown, a humble welder and local church leader in Topeka, Kansas, filed a lawsuit so that his third-grade daughter Linda could attend an all-white school just seven blocks from her home -- rather than an all-Black school more than a mile away.

He just wanted equality for his daughter. He believed in the promise contained in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

And when *Brown v. Board of Education* finally got to the Supreme Court – in 1954 – all nine justices agreed. They said segregation was wrong. They also affirmed that equality was a central goal of education.

It is worth noting that a key element of the ruling in *Brown* was a famous study on children's perceptions of race conducted by a great New Yorker, the psychologist Kenneth Clark, who went on to serve as the first African-American member of the Board of Regents.

In the decision in *Brown*, the Supreme Court made clear that – for all of the injustices in the world – some of which may be beyond our power to correct -- there was one institution that was different – one place where the promise of equality should and could actually come to pass.

That was the school. Schools have often been called the great equalizer – the place where the impact of our differences of economic class and background can be erased – and where our qualities of intellect, creativity, hard work, and persistence can triumph.

That's what they said 60 years ago and they challenged us to make it real – and for 60 years Americans all across this country have tried to make it happen.

We passed federal laws to provide extra resources to low-income children. We passed state laws to increase funding for schools.

We passed policies to strengthen the teaching profession and integrated the teaching force.

Those of us who work in education shared that dream and believed we could make a difference in the lives of children.

Indeed, I became a teacher because a teacher saved my life. My mother passed away in October of my 4th grade year. At the time, I was in Mr. Osterweil's classroom at P.S. 276 in Canarsie, Brooklyn.

I lived at home alone with my father who was then suffering from undiagnosed Alzheimer's disease. As his condition deteriorated and he ultimately passed away when I was 12, I never knew from one night to the next what home would be like.

But for all the scariness and pain in life outside of school, in Mr. Osterweil's classroom I was engaged and challenged and nurtured. Mr. Osterweil created this amazing safe space where I read the *New York Times* every day, and participated in productions of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Alice in Wonderland*. I discovered the joy of learning.

I know school can be the difference between hope and despair because it was for me – and I have dedicated my life to trying to create more classrooms like Mr. Osterweil’s. Like countless other educators, my life’s work is about schools as a vehicle of hope.

But for all of our efforts – today – 60 years after the Supreme Court said that segregated schools were inherently unequal – we remain a society with grossly unequal schools and tragically unequal outcomes.

I mentioned the disparity in graduation and college-completion rates. When you look at test scores it’s just as stark: in every grade and subject, the percentage of students of color performing at grade level is about half that of White students. That’s true for both the national test known as NAEP and the New York State test.

Believe it or not, 60 years after *Brown*, we also remain deeply segregated. According to one recent report, New York has the most segregated schools in the country – both racially and economically.

Not only do our 700 school district lines often track patterns of residential economic segregation, there are school districts in this state today – including New York City – with boundary lines within the district that keep children of wealth starkly separated from children of poverty -- and we know from our history that segregation – whether it’s economic or racial -- breeds inequality.

The facts are plain: America spends less to educate poor children than wealthy children. Fewer poor children have access to high quality pre-school. Poor children are often assigned to less effective teachers and have fewer resources in their schools.

They have fewer after-school programs and fewer social and emotional supports. If they are high achieving students, they have less access to rigorous courses and they are far less likely to go to a top-notch college.

By every single measure – whether it is classroom grades or test scores, or high school and college graduation rates, our children of poverty and

children of color are further behind, and the promise of equality through education still eludes us.

We always hoped that somehow society's stubborn injustices would be denied entry to our classrooms. The classroom was supposed to be sacred – a protected haven where children would be given the tools to succeed in equal measure.

We all put our faith in our schools to help solve society's toughest problems – from poverty and joblessness to crime and social breakdown. And with each decade, the effort to bring about equality through the classroom takes new form. With each decade, we become bolder, more creative and more determined.

The nation required states and districts to prove with a common assessment that all kids are meeting standards and to publish data by race, income and other factors – so we know how the performance of children of poverty compares with that of children of wealth.

We created charter schools – some of which are defying the odds and outperforming some of our wealthiest schools in the state.

In 2010, here in New York, we committed to require schools to meet high standards that prepare all children for college, work, and life – and we passed laws to hold ourselves responsible and to know which schools and teachers are succeeding or struggling – and to do something about it when the outcomes fall short.

Administrators, unions, school boards, and elected officials all signed agreements in support of these higher standards for teaching and learning.

And today there is even more we can do -- concrete steps we can take in New York -- to better realize the promise of *Brown*.

With the support of the Board of Regents and the legislature, we can create regional and magnet high schools with strong instructional programs that attract a more diverse student body from across district lines.

With the support of the Board of Regents and the legislature, New York can focus on providing greater supports to our English Language Learners, invest in bilingual education, and pass the New York State Dream Act so that undocumented students can go to college.

In the tradition of Assemblyman Arthur Eve, we can raise college completion rates by building in more supports for low-income students through investments in the opportunity programs at SUNY, CUNY, and in the independent sector.

We can restructure school funding formulas to promote greater equity, and we can continue to increase our State's investment in early learning.

And at the local level, we can redraw school boundaries and change enrollment policies to foster socioeconomic integration.

We can do all of these things. But none of this will pay off if we don't teach to high standards and hold ourselves accountable. And lately there's been a troubling backlash to those foundational policies.

You've seen it in the media and in the political arena. You've seen it in schools and communities across the state where some parents, some educators, some union leaders and some politicians say the standards are too high. They argue that we should not hold ourselves accountable for student learning.

Now -- I fully appreciate how difficult change can be. Like all new initiatives -- our policies are imperfect and need continuous reflection and adjustment. I know that the transition to higher standards has not gone smoothly everywhere.

But it's also an exaggeration to say that it puts too much pressure on the system. The fact is -- as of today -- four full years after New York State adopted higher standards -- not a single teacher or principal has been replaced under the new evaluation law, and few if any will face any consequences for at least another year. And even then it will be a very small percentage.

The evaluation law is not a “gotcha” system – it is a vehicle for fostering continuous improvement. And New York has invested more than \$500 million in professional development to help everyone improve.

Teachers, administrators, and districts have been given time to get this right and they will continue to have more time and more support in the years ahead.

As we continue to move forward and improve, let’s also remember why we set high standards and why we have assessments and accountability. We do it for one reason: our children and the reality that education is their best shot at success in the 21st century. This is especially true for our low-income children of color – who have only one slim little chance of making it in this world. That slim little chance is education.

They don’t have inherited wealth. They don’t have connections. They have education. That’s it. Nothing else.

And if we don’t hold ourselves accountable – and if we don’t demand transparency around student growth – and if we don’t challenge ourselves to give our kids the very best education possible – children of color and low-income children will be the first to lose.

The adults won’t lose. The people who defend the status quo won’t lose. Only the children will lose.

They’ll go through 10 or 12 years of schooling barely learning to read, struggling with math, and some will cover up their low self-image by acting out, by bullying, by abusing substances, or just withdrawing completely.

Eventually, they just drop out – and plunge off the cliff into dead-end jobs, prison or an early grave. Tens of thousands of New York’s children make that deadly decision every year – and disproportionately those children look like Linda Brown.

I respect those voices who urge thoughtful adjustments. I look for constructive insights from my critics. I listen patiently even when the attacks become personal.

But too many of the voices attacking the Common Core have done so with false narratives about the motives and intentions of education reform. This isn't about privatization or federal curriculum or enriching testing companies.

This is about taking responsibility for educating every single child no matter what his or her race, background or economic status.

What those who resist high standards for all students are really saying is that some kids are just not going to make it and that's acceptable.

But it is NOT acceptable. It violates everything that America stands for. It's an assault on the values of America, a country based on equality of opportunity. It's also short-sighted because society carries the financial burdens of a permanent underclass.

Worse yet, by retreating from accountability and allowing children at risk to slip through the cracks, advocates of lower standards deny us the talents of all Americans – talents that are desperately needed to keep America strong and growing in this new century.

If they succeed in their destructive goal of crippling the landmark advancement -- of 45 states committing to college and career ready expectations for all students -- it will be a setback to the cause of greater equality in our schools. And that would be a disgrace.

Sixty years after *Brown*, we should not be able to point to neighborhoods in New York where one public school serves mostly poor students and achieves painfully discouraging results -- while another public school just a few blocks away serves mostly affluent students and puts them on the path to success. That is a disgrace.

So I ask you today, why are we silent? Why do we accept these outcomes? Why do we allow *Brown v. Board of Education* to be a dream deferred?

It does NOT have to be this way. Through the course of over 70 school visits since September, I have spent time in classrooms that are making a difference. I have seen students in a high needs Rochester school learning-- thanks to the Common Core--to see math as not merely a set of rules to memorize, but as a set of tools to solve real world problems. I have seen students in a Harlem elementary school discussing the evidence for common themes in the classic texts *Watsons Go to Birmingham* and *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry*. Thirty-year veteran teachers tell me how their work on the Common Core has helped children achieve at levels they never thought possible.

This is no time to buy into those false voices that say we don't need accountability and we don't need proof that all kids are learning. To them I say "Don't just tell us they're learning, show us they're learning."

Now is the time for all of us – people of every race and background – to come together and remember the promise of *Brown* – remember the promise of equality – and remember the promise we have all made to our children.

We brought them into this world and promised to protect and provide for them – to give them an opportunity to grow up with safety– and to enable them to seek their passion – inspire their curiosity – and find their place in the world.

We all want better for them. That's what Oliver Brown wanted for his daughter Linda and that's what we all want for our sons and daughters.

And until we have it – we cannot be silent. We cannot stand by while inequality persists. We cannot ignore the staggering differences in educational outcomes among our children of different races and backgrounds. That's not America.

We are one people, one society, and one nation and when we raise our voices together in pursuit of our common values we can produce a sound that is greater than all of those voices of fear, defeat and retreat. These are all our children. This is our responsibility. And we will not be silent.

Thank you.