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Comment on Ng's *Wealth Redistribution, Race, and Southern Public Schools, 1880-1910*

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Abstract
Wherein the author raises criticisms and advances qualifications to the conclusions reached by Kenneth Ng is his article "Wealth Redistribution, Race and Southern Public Schools, 1880-1910."

Kenneth Ng has argued, in his article published as issue 17 of volume 9 of *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, that Bullock, Fishlow, Harris, Kousser, and Margo have incorrectly assumed that segregation allowed whites to draw off Southern Black tax contributions to support public education. This argument, like many in social history, is as much about current conditions as the past. As Ng wrote just before the conclusion,

> It is difficult if not impossible to argue the level of subsidy implied by equal expenditures on Black and white children, given the relative reliance on the poll and property tax, the voter participation rates of Blacks and whites, and the level of Black and white taxable property is superior to another level of subsidy implied by different levels of expenditure. In fact, if variation in taxable property and voter participation across states and time are

> considered, equalizing expenditures across race would lead to different levels of net subsidy across states and over time. It is difficult to see how the particular pattern of subsidy implied by equal expenditures is "best."

In other words, Ng is arguing that, if the history of segregation did not lead to a net subsidy of white children's education by Black children's, the whole notion of equalizing fuding per child is irrational. Ng's claim acquires particular salience because the historical arguments over school funding in the South often *did* focus on whether school funding was in proportion to taxes paid. This argument requires examination of the historical evidence used, Ng's interpretation of public funding in the context of Southern education in the pre-Brown years, the consequences of segregation for public education more broadly, and the broader question of fairness in funding.

Use of Evidence

Ng is injudicious in presenting both spending and revenue data for schools. Table 2, which is the basis for Ng's analysis, captures only teachers' salaries. Today, when direct instruction only occupies about half of full-time-equivalent staffing in public schools, no one would imagine using classroom salaries as a proxy for total spending. In the pre-Brown era, public schools spent disproportionately on white schools not only for teachers but also for supplies, supervision, and capital construction. Southern schools forced Black schools to use second-hand books (commonly passed on from white schools), had less publicly-funded supervision of Black teachers (for the most visible supervisors of Southern Black schools were the privately-funded Jeanes teachers), and scrimped on construction of schools (Anderson, 1988). Ironically enough, in one of the sources Ng uses (Kousser's 1980 article on the *Cumming v. Richmond* case in Augusta, Georgia), Kousser makes clear that the data used for comparative purposes, teacher salaries, underestimates the disproportionate funding for white schools and that, if all costs (including the value of schools) were available, any net subsidy for Black schools would certainly be reversed (Kousser, "Separate but not Equal," pp. 24-26).

Ng's use of revenue data is similarly incomplete. He uses voter participation as a proportional proxy for poll tax revenues from Southerners. Many tax collectors were inconsistent before disfranchisement, and many after disfranchisement laws collected the poll tax from Black residents, secure that other barriers would prevent them from voting. In addition, Ng ignores other potential sources of financial support for schools. Educational funding was idiosyncratic in the segregationist South. Some jurisdictions relied on the poll and property taxes, but in other areas, indirect taxes on utility and landlord property—some part of which certianly was passed on to renters—also contributed to schools (which Kousser estimates as 12 percent in North Carolina, in one of the articles cited by Ng). Some schools charged tuition. Many communities raised funds voluntarily. Absent a careful analysis of support state-by-state, the conclusions Ng can draw from the data presented here are merely speculative. (The fact that Kousser, adding in estimates of indirect taxation, concludes that any net subsidy of Black schools in North Carolina shrank dramatically in the same time period Ng covers should make readers extremely cautious about any statement about subsidies.)

Historical Context of Segregation and School Expenditures

Ng's statistical analysis is removed from the context of historical school politics in the South. Two facets of that history are important to understanding the consequences of

segregation for educational opportunities in the South. First, segregation made public education safe for white politicians. Many white politicians, including John Harlan before he became Justice Harlan (the dissenter in *Plessy* and the author of the *Cumming v. Richmond* decision leaving demonstrably unequal education alone in Augusta), struggled with how to frame the educational debates after Reconstruction. In some cases, equal funding (often framed as "proportionate" funding) was explicitly debated. After the disfranchisement of most African-American and many white voters, as well as the codification of segregation, white politicians could expand schooling for whites without incurring any political cost. Unlike the immediate post-Civil War era, when public schooling was politically radical, the expansion of schooling, especially high schools, was tame and fit within the caste system of the South *because* of the newly-confirmed capacity to provide unequal opportunities. In other areas of the country, and in the South at other times, I would suspect that any "school subsidy" analyzed in the same way would be far greater than what Ng describes here. By failing to make such comparisons, Ng is suggesting that any subsidy is fair in the context of the political environment of the time.

The second key context is the crucial use of the high school, which used relatively little funding compared to elementary schools at the time, in creating unequal educational opportunities. The Southern high school was largely for "whites only" in the first third of the twentieth century and still unavailable to African-Americans in many parts of the rural South as late as 1960 (Anderson, 1980). Aggregating all expenditure hides the effect of different funding on secondary schooling. By analyzing all educational expenditures, Ng has effectively ignored how white students had demonstrably unequal access to secondary education.

Public Programs without Net Subsidies?

Ng suggests that a funding scheme that is dramatically unequal in direct spending can still be fair. His measure of fairness, net subsidy, flies in the face of all government public-good spending practices. Spending on any service or good accessible to the general population (or a segment of it, such as schoolchildren) is necessarily redistributive on some basis, since the elimination of subsidies would require an accounting scheme that limits spending to individual disbursements. The purpose of spending for fire, police, health, and schooling is to provide services judged necessary for the whole population. Police and fire services subsidize some geographic areas at the expense of others. Public health programs subsidize the unhealthy. Schooling subsidizes the young.

Ng's argument is not unique, though it has appeared more commonly in the philosophical arguments about intergenerational transfers of wealth involved in Social Security's "pay as you go" system. Ng is raising the ghost of the net subsidy argument, which Southern white politicians used *and rejected* more than a century ago. What is notable is why white politicans rejected the argument. They certainly were both comfortable with and had reasons to encourage unequal funding. However, shrewd politicians like North Carolina Governor Charles Brantley Aycock knew that white school boards had sufficient legal discretion at their disposal, after disfranchisement, to spend school funds as they wished. Adding a legal mandate for unequal spending would merely draw attention to a fact that they wished would remain undiscussed (Kousser, "Progressivism"). So, too, politicians today are trying mightily to avoid the issue of unequal funding. They should not take any comfort from the history of school spending in the segregationist South.

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