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## **Still Separate But Unequal Societies -- and School Districts**

This bit of news won't come as a surprise to many of you, but it ought to make you sick.

Thirty years ago, the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders warned that "our nation is moving toward to two societies: one black, one white -- separate and unequal."

On Tuesday, we'll get an update on the commission's account from the Milton S. Eisenhower Foundation. The prophecy, the anniversary report says, has come true.

- The unemployment rate for young men in inner cities -- most of whom are black -- is over 30 percent, compared with a national rate of under 5 percent.
- The U.S. income gap has widened to the point that the top 1 percent of Americans has more wealth than the bottom 90 percent. The poor are disproportionately African-America and Hispanic.
- One in three young black men is in prison, on probation or on parole.
- States now spend more per year on prisons than on higher education. Ten years ago the spend priorities were reversed.

And this: "Forty-three percent of minority children attend urban schools. Most attend schools where more than half the students are poor. In these schools, more than two-third of children fail to meet even the minimum standard for national tests," said Lynn Curtis, president of the foundation.

If there is any comfort at all in that statement, it is that Fort Worth is not alone in failing its children.

We've known for years that our minority and poor students lag behind their white counterparts; that they are disproportionately represented in special-education classes; that they fail the state standardized assessment

test in disproportionate numbers; that they are disproportionately suspended and expelled.

You might not always read about that in the newspaper, but you will read about the Fort Worth school district's much-publicized efforts to improve the quality of education for our children. Superintendent Thomas Tocco has announced everything from reading initiatives to a new bilingual program. "I'm regarded as a very proactive superintendent," he told me.

But the jury is still out on how effective his initiatives will be. Because the problems of racism and poverty are so far-reaching, all of it may amount to little or nothing.

What's at stake is nothing less than our future. Those children who don't get thrown out of school will lose hope and eventually drop out -- or, worse, simply fail. They will be the new faces in our nation's unemployment lines, the new faces of poverty, the faces behind our prison bars.

On this much, Fort Worth school board members agree.

"If we don't do something to address the needs of the children, then you're absolutely right," said trustee Elaine Klos. "That's our next unemployable and our next prison population."

The Eisenhower Foundation reports that most Americans don't know what to do reverse the racial, educational, job, wage and housing breach facing us.

"Over the past 25 to 30 years, African-Americans and African-American students have been researched and explored to the nth degree," said Associate Superintendent Hardy Murphy. "The result of that research has been an infinite array of explanations. However, there are no acceptable reasons for the failure of our schools to successfully educate all children. The fact of the matter is, the only true measure of equal opportunity is whether or not we have equal results."

When we don't, a double sin is committed: the sin of abandonment, by principals and teachers who give up on low-scoring minority kids, preferring to blame poverty, or a lack of parental involvement, for their failure; and the sin of acceptance, by board members and administrators who look the other way.

Tocco says he has been an advocate for minority and poor children from Day One. "The initiatives that I have recommended for this board have all had a disproportionate positive impact for minority children," he said.

"They have not been package that way or marketed that way, but that has been the case."

In a school district that is predominantly minority, that has a poor record of educating minority children, that regularly uses this newspaper to tout its initiatives, such a lack of publicity struck me as odd. But I understand. I don't like it, but I understand.

Tocco has to read lightly. This is Fort Worth, where the rule is to avoid racial confrontations at all costs, where people would rather romanticize about race than admit that the color of one's skin by itself can put you at a great disadvantage.

That, perhaps, is the third sin. We're willing to sacrifice our children, our own future, for the sake of political correctness.

The Kerner Commission has said that there are still two countries in America. Even though we like to think we're different from Dallas, like to pat ourselves on the back for keeping racial harmony, there are also two communities in Fort Worth.

And the poor academic performance of minority students suggests that there may even be two school systems.