

# Appeals Court Ruling

## Edited text of 4th Circuit Court's Friday ruling

This case was argued before the en banc Court on February 27, 2001. The parties presented a number of issues for our consideration, including whether the district court erred in

(1) finding that unitary status had been achieved and awarding attorneys' fees to plaintiff intervenors based on this finding;

(2) holding that the establishment of a magnet schools program was an ultra vires, unconstitutional act justifying an award of nominal damages and attorneys' fees;

(3) enjoining the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board from considering race in the future assignment of students or allocation of educational resources; and

(4) sanctioning the Board for failing to comply with the district court's discovery order.

Having considered the briefs and arguments of the parties, a majority of the Court holds:

(1) by a 7-4 vote (Chief Judge Wilkinson and Judges Widener, Wilkins, Niemeyer, Luttig, Williams and Traxler in the affirmative), the school system has achieved unitary status, but by a 6-5 vote (Chief Judge Wilkinson and Judges Niemeyer, Michael, Motz, King and Gregory in the affirmative) attorneys' fees for work done on the unitary status issue are denied;

(2) by a 6-5 vote (Chief Judge Wilkinson and Judges Niemeyer, Michael, Motz, King, and Gregory

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## Key findings

- By a 7-4 vote, the court found CMS to be unitary, meaning that all vestiges of legal segregation have been eliminated. The finding ends court oversight, and also the court mandate to use means including involuntary busing to achieve desegregation.
- By a 6-5 vote, the court denied attorney's fees to the Capacchione and Green plaintiffs.
- By a 6-5 vote, the court ruled that CMS had not violated its immunity in operation of the magnet program, and denied attorney's fees.
- By unanimous votes, the court ended an injunction against using race. It also held the schools liable for fees for delaying the delivery of a witness list during 1999 court hearings.

## The reaction

The school board met Friday and voted unanimously not to appeal. Indications are they will proceed with the July 31 student assignment plan, which combines assignment to schools close to home, magnet schools and opportunities to move to schools other than those assigned by choosing available seats within geographic zones. Lawyers for the Swann plaintiffs said they would decide later on whether to appeal.

## Index to decision

Judge Traxler's majority opinion, pages 1-20. Judge Wilkinson's opinion, joined by Judge Niemeyer, pages 21-22. Judge Widener's opinion, pages 22-23. Judge Luttig's opinion, pages 23-27. Judge Motz's and Judge King's opinion, joined by Judges Michael and Gregory, pages 27-48.

## This special coverage

Educate! provides this edited text of the decision in the belief that public awareness of both majority and minority views on the court is essential to the community's search for justice in overcoming past segregation. Rules we followed in editing the court's text are listed on page 48.

In future issues, Educate! will return to elements of the decision. Citizen comments on the decision or the schools' future are also welcome. Please message SwannFello@aol.com with your comments.

The full text of the ruling is at [www.ca4.uscourts.gov](http://www.ca4.uscourts.gov)

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in the affirmative), the Board did not forfeit its immunity for the establishment of the magnet schools program, and nominal damages and attorneys' fees in that regard are denied;

(3) by a unanimous vote, the injunction is vacated; and

(4) by a unanimous vote, the imposition of sanctions is affirmed.

The judgment of the district court is therefore affirmed on the finding of unitary status and the imposition of sanctions, reversed as to the finding of liability for nominal damages for the establishment of the magnet schools program, reversed as to the imposition of attorneys' fees for any reason, and reversed on the issuance of the injunction.

Unitary status having been achieved, the judgment of the district court vacating and dissolving all prior injunctive orders and decrees is affirmed. The Board is to operate the school system without the strictures of these decrees no later than the 2002-2003 school year.

This case is hopefully the final chapter in the saga of federal court control over the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools ("CMS"). Since 1971 CMS has operated under a federally supervised desegregation plan that included limited use of racial ratios, pairing and grouping of school zones, and extensive busing. So successful was the plan that the district court removed the case from the active docket in 1975, expressing its belief that the once reluctant school board was committed to achieving desegregation and was

already well on the way toward a unitary school system. Since then, two generations of students have passed through CMS and, until the present case, not one person has returned to court alleging that segregative practices have been continued or revived.

Now, nearly three decades later and prompted by a lawsuit filed by a white student challenging the magnet schools admissions policy, the question of whether CMS has achieved unitary status has been placed before our courts. In 1999, the district court, after a lengthy hearing and searching inquiry, concluded that CMS had indeed achieved unitary status by eliminating the vestiges of past discrimination to the extent practicable. This conclusion was not reached in haste; it was the result of a two-month hearing and an examination of extensive testimony and evidence relating to every aspect of CMS's educational system.

A majority of this court now affirms the district court's holding on this issue, satisfied that CMS has dismantled the dual school system. In sharp contrast to the situation in the late 1960s, when black students were segregated in black schools and taught by a predominantly black staff, CMS students today are educated in an integrated environment by an integrated faculty. Nor do we turn over control to an indecisive and uncommitted school board. CMS currently operates under the firm guidance of an integrated school board which has clearly demonstrated its commitment to a desegregated school system.

In sum, the "end purpose" of

federal intervention to remedy segregation has been served, and it is time to complete the task with which we were charged – to show confidence in those who have achieved this success and to restore to state and local authorities the control of their school system. Consequently, a majority of this court affirms the district court's unitary status determination.

However, while a majority of my colleagues agree that CMS has achieved unitary status, and have graciously joined me on this point, I respectfully depart from a separate majority's decision to reverse the district court's holding that CMS's magnet schools program, which was implemented in 1992, was an ultra vires, unconstitutional act justifying an award of nominal damages and attorney fees. By denying children, on account of their race, an equal opportunity to compete for open, unclaimed slots in CMS's extraordinary magnet program, I believe the school board pushed too far and did more than either was required or permitted. Just as the educational process of the 1960s unconstitutionally deprived black children of educational opportunities solely on account of their race, the magnet schools admissions policy deprives white children of educational opportunities solely on account of their race. Consequently, I depart from the separate majority in that I would affirm the district court's conclusion that the magnet schools program violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and the liability of the school board for the

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**The name:** The Swann Fellowship was named for Darius and Vera Swann, who on behalf of their son James became the lead plaintiffs in Swann vs. Mecklenburg in the 1960s. Darius Swann was the first African American Presbyterian missionary ever assigned outside of Africa. His experiences in India led him to appreciate the value of an integrated society for human development.

**The vision:** As people of faith, our vision is that all children in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System will have excellent educational

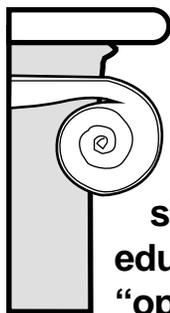
opportunities which are both equitable and integrated.

**The background:** Formed in 1997 out of several Charlotte religious congregations, the Fellowship focuses on being a witness to the value of diversity, and educating the public on public school issues as they relate to this and allied subjects. The Swann Fellowship is a non-profit organization exempt under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code 56-2106776. Financial information about this organization and a copy of its license are available from the State Solicitation Licensing Branch at 1-888-830-4989. The license is not an endorsement by the state.

## History

In 1896, the Supreme Court upheld a Louisiana statute “providing for separate railway carriages for the white and colored races.” The Plessy majority characterized the statute as “not necessarily imply[ing] the inferiority of either race,” but the first Justice Harlan, in dissent, aptly described the true aim of the law: “Everyone knows that the statute in question had its origin in the purpose, not so much to exclude white persons from railroad cars occupied by blacks, as to exclude colored people from coaches occupied by or assigned to white persons.” Justice Harlan further “den[ie]d that any legislative body or judicial tribunal may have regard to the race of citizens when the civil rights of those citizens are involved.” Unfortunately, the principle of “separate but equal” reached much farther than Louisiana railways, and was applied to other public services, including education. The march of progress eventually proved the correctness of Justice Harlan’s principled stand. Segregation, in all of its manifestations, was “arbitrary” and “wholly inconsistent with the civil freedom and the equality before the law established by the Constitution.”

Early efforts aimed at combating the injustice wrought by Plessy in educational settings often centered on state-funded graduate and professional schools. In *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* (1938), an African-American student was denied admission to the University of Missouri School of Law on account of his race. Missouri had no “separate but equal” law school for its African-American citizens and instead offered to pay Gaines’ tuition and expenses for a legal education in another state. The Supreme Court held that Missouri’s offer denied Gaines equal protection of the laws. The Court observed that “[t]he admissibility of laws separating the



**The (1954) Court emphasized that an educational “opportunity, where a state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.”**

... races in the enjoyment of privileges afforded by the State rests wholly upon the equality of the privileges which the laws give to the separated groups within the State.” Though providing only small victories, cases like *Gaines* exposed “separate but equal” for the untenable proposition that it was.

In 1954, the Supreme Court recognized the futility of measuring equality in segregated facilities [in] *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) (*Brown I*). Presented with a direct attack on Plessy in a secondary education case, the Court held that “segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race” violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. The Court emphasized that an educational “opportunity, where a state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.” Recognizing that segregation differed from locality to locality, the Supreme Court subsequently declined to craft a broad, one-size-fits-all remedy, and instead instructed the federal district courts to oversee the implementation of appropriate relief based on the dictates of local circumstances. The district courts were directed to make use of the “traditional attributes of equity power,” to ensure that students were

“admit[ted] to public schools on a racially nondiscriminatory basis.” However, under the *Brown* opinions it was unclear whether a school district was required to take affirmative steps to remedy the constitutional violation.

Before the Supreme Court provided further guidance to the lower federal courts, in 1965 the Swann plaintiffs, who were the original class action plaintiffs representing the interests of African-American children in the district, challenged as constitutionally inadequate the efforts of CMS in complying with *Brown*. The school district’s desegregation plan was based on freedom of choice whereby “any child, without regard to race, and without regard to minority or majority of race in any particular school, might freely transfer to another school of his choice.” The district court approved the plan, observing that more could be done “to increase mixing of the races,” but that the law imposed “no such duty upon . . . the School Board.”

Concerned at the slow pace of school desegregation throughout the nation, the Supreme Court held in 1968 that school boards had an “affirmative duty” to end the state-imposed dual system of education [in] *Green v. County School Board*. The Justices underscored that “in desegregating a dual system a plan utilizing ‘freedom of choice’ is not an end in itself.” The Swann plaintiffs then filed in the district court a motion for further relief “seek[ing] greater speed in desegregation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, and request[ing] elimination of certain other alleged racial inequalities.” The district court, guided by the mandate of *Green*, made a number of factual findings and concluded that the school district remained highly segregated.

The district court noted that over half of CMS’s 24,000 African-American students “attend schools that are all black, or very nearly all black, and most of the 24,000 have no white teachers.” However, the court found no viola-

tions “in the use of federal funds; the use of mobile classrooms; quality of school buildings and facilities; athletics; PTA activities; school fees; free lunches; books; elective courses; nor in individual evaluation of students.”

The district court directed CMS to submit “a positive plan for faculty desegregation effective in the fall of 1969, and a plan for effective desegregation of pupil population, to be predominantly effective in the fall of 1969 and to be completed by the fall of 1970.” The board procrastinated, but eventually submitted an enervated desegregation plan that the district court approved “with great reluctance” on a temporary basis. CMS officials, however, continued to drag their feet, and the district court was forced to appoint its own expert, Dr. John A. Finger, to craft an efficacious desegregation plan. Dr. Finger’s plan, adopted by the district court, included limited use of mathematical ratios, pairing and grouping of school zones, and busing. We affirmed a portion of the plan, but vacated provisions dealing with the busing of elementary school students because of the perceived burdens on small children and the cost of purchasing new buses. We remanded “for reconsideration of the assignment of pupils in the elementary schools.” The Supreme Court granted certiorari and reinstated the district court’s plan pending further proceedings. The district court conducted eight days of hearings and examined five different desegregation plans. The district court concluded the Finger plan to be the best of the five, encompassing “a reasonable . . . collection of methods for solving the problem” of the dual system. As for busing and the cost of new buses, the district court found that the Finger plan took “proper advantage of traffic movement” and that new buses would cost only \$660,000, a far cry from the millions of dollars that CMS had originally estimated. Two months later, the Supreme Court granted certiorari and undertook an in-

depth review of the power of the federal district courts to craft such sweeping desegregation remedies.

The Supreme Court affirmed the desegregation plan adopted by the district court, and in the course of its opinion identified and offered guidance in “four problem areas.” First, the Court addressed the issue of the district court’s use of racial ratios. While the Supreme Court approved of a limited use of mathematical ratios in a plan crafted by a district court, it emphasized that such ratios were “a starting point . . . rather than an inflexible requirement.” The Court reminded district courts that “[t]he constitutional command to desegregate schools does not mean that every school in every community must always reflect the racial composition of the school system as a whole.” Second, the Court dealt with single-race schools. Though the Court concluded that schools consisting of predominantly one race were not per se unconstitutional, the Court instructed the district courts to utilize “close scrutiny to determine that school assignments are not part of state-enforced segregation.” Third, the Court considered alterations of attendance zones. The Court held “that the pairing and grouping of noncontiguous school zones is a permissible tool,” but declined to craft “rigid rules” in light of differing local circumstances. Finally, the Court tackled the busing issue. The Court confirmed that a district court could order “bus transportation as one tool of school desegregation,” but within reasonable time and distance restrictions.

Shortly after the Supreme Court issued its landmark Swann opinion, CMS asked the district court to abandon the Finger plan and permit the substitution of a “feeder plan” whereby schools would draw pupils from designated attendance areas in an effort to keep children together for their entire public school career. Citing concerns of resegregation and the placement of additional burdens

on African-American children, the district court questioned the feeder plan. CMS then withdrew its original feeder plan and began work on a modified version. The district court eventually approved a revised feeder plan that reopened several former black schools and prevented over- and under-utilization of facilities.

However, within just two years it became clear that CMS’s revised feeder plan was inadequate “for dealing with foreseeable problems” in the dismantling of the dual system. The district court found “that various formerly black schools and other schools will turn black under the feeder plan,” and that “[r]acial discrimination through official action has not ended in this school system.” The district court again instructed CMS to design a new pupil assignment plan “on the premise that equal protection of laws is here to stay.”

In 1974 CMS adopted and the district court approved new guidelines and policies for pupil assignment. The plan was designed by a citizens advisory group working with the board in an effort to reach “an acceptable consensus” on school desegregation in CMS. The plan’s most promising features were the avoidance of any majority black schools (with the exception of Hidden Valley, an exempted school), and a more equal distribution of the busing burden. Praising the board for making “a clean break with the essentially ‘reluctant’ attitude which dominated Board actions for many years,” the district court predicted that the policies and positive attitude would eventually result in a unitary school system.

The district court closed Swann in 1975 and removed the case from the active docket. In so doing, the district court observed that the board was “actively and intelligently addressing” recurrent problems related to dismantlement of the dual system. The district court was so satisfied with the progress being made that it questioned whether it would ever

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be confronted with a motion to reopen the litigation.

For three years there was no action in the case. This changed in 1978 when a group of white parents sought to enjoin CMS from reassigning over 4,000 students in an effort to maintain racial balance in certain schools. The parents attacking the 1978 student assignment plan “offered no live evidence but offered and relied upon a few written exhibits and admissions from the pleadings.” Not surprisingly, the district court rejected the parents’ challenge to the student assignment plan and praised CMS for its zeal in dismantling the dual system.

In 1980, CMS and the Swann plaintiffs again returned to the district court. The parties informed the district court that the African-American student population in CMS’s elementary schools had grown from twenty-nine percent to forty percent, making it difficult to avoid predominantly black student bodies. To provide the board with some flexibility, the district court permitted operation of elementary schools with African-American student bodies of plus fifteen percent above the district-wide average.

Since 1980, neither the board nor the Swann plaintiffs have approached the district court regarding alteration of the earlier desegregation orders. And, until the present litigation, the Swann plaintiffs have never attempted to reopen the case in order to address any alleged failure by the board to comply with the district court’s desegregation orders.

The controversy before us today arose in September 1997 when William Capacchione (“Capacchione”) filed suit against CMS on behalf of his daughter, Cristina, alleging that she had been unconstitutionally denied admission to a magnet school program on account of her race. In 1992, without prior court approval, CMS had adopted a desegregation plan focused mainly

on the use of magnet schools. In filling magnet schools, CMS had instituted a black and a non-black lottery to achieve racial balance. If a sufficient number of blacks or whites did not apply and fill the seats allotted to their respective races, then CMS would actively recruit children of the desired race despite lengthy waiting lists made up of children of the other race. If the recruitment drive failed, CMS usually left the available slots vacant. Cristina, who is white, was placed on a waiting list and eventually denied admission to a program at the Olde Providence magnet school, which CMS marketed as “a school to benefit everyone.”

The original Swann plaintiffs moved to reactivate Swann and to consolidate it with Capacchione’s suit. They asserted that the vestiges of the dual school system had not been abolished and that the use of race in the magnet admissions policy was necessary for the school district to comply with the prior desegregation orders. The district court granted the motion and later permitted Capacchione to intervene in the Swann litigation. Seeking a finding that CMS had eradicated the vestiges of past discrimination, another group of parents, led by Michael P. Grant (“Grant”), was also permitted to intervene in the litigation.

After a two-month bench trial, the district court determined that CMS had achieved unitary status, that the race-based admissions policy for CMS’s magnet schools fell outside prior orders and was not narrowly tailored to achieve a compelling state interest, and that an injunction was warranted. The district court “enjoin[ed] CMS from any further use of race-based lotteries, preferences, and set-asides in student assignment.” Citing interests in stability, the district court concluded that the injunction would not affect student assignments for the 1999-2000 school year, but would apply to student assignments for the 2000-2001 school year. The dis-

trict court awarded Capacchione nominal damages in recognition of the constitutional violation and also awarded the plaintiff-intervenors’ attorney fees. CMS and the Swann plaintiffs filed notices of appeal, and CMS moved to stay the injunction, except as applied to the magnet schools, until the 2001-02 school year. The Swann plaintiffs moved for a complete stay pending appeal. On November 15, 1999, the district court denied the motions. CMS and the Swann plaintiffs, pursuant to Federal Rule of Appellate Procedure 8(a)(2), moved this court for a stay. On December 30, 1999, we stayed the district court’s injunction pending further order of this court.

After briefing and appellate arguments, a divided panel of this court vacated and remanded the district court’s unitary status determination, holding that the district court’s findings were insufficient in the areas of student assignment, facilities and resources, transportation, and student achievement. As for CMS’s magnet schools admissions policy, the panel held that the policy was specifically permitted by prior court orders and that the policy did not violate the Constitution. The panel also vacated the district court’s injunction, the award of nominal damages, and the award of attorney fees. A majority of the active circuit judges thereafter voted to hear this appeal en banc.

### Unitary status

The district court’s unitary status finding is reviewed for clear error. “A finding is clearly erroneous when, although there is evidence to support it, on the entire evidence the reviewing court is left with the definite and firm conviction that a mistake has been committed.” In clarifying the clearly erroneous standard, the Supreme Court has explained: “If the district court’s account of the evidence is plausible in light of the record viewed in its entirety, the court of appeals may not reverse it even though convinced

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that had it been sitting as the trier of fact, it would have weighed the evidence differently. Where there are two permissible views of the evidence, the factfinder's choice between them cannot be clearly erroneous."

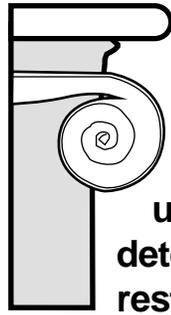
The Supreme Court also stressed that even when appellate review is based primarily on documentary evidence, the clearly erroneous standard of review remains the same. So long as the district court's unitary status determination rests on a permissible view of the evidence, it must be affirmed.

The Supreme Court has declined to define or provide a "fixed meaning" for the term "unitary." However, in light of the aim of Brown I, which was "the elimination of state-mandated or deliberately maintained dual school systems," a school system must be declared unitary when it no longer discriminates between children on the basis of race. The burden of proof falls on the party seeking an end to court supervision.

In undertaking a unitary status inquiry, a court must ask "whether the Board ha[s] complied in good faith with the desegregation decree since it was entered, and whether the vestiges of past discrimination ha[ve] been eliminated to the extent practicable."

Implicit in the Supreme Court's use of the term "practicable" is "a reasonable limit on the duration of . . . federal supervision." Hence, the goals of a desegregation order not only encompass a remedy for the violation, but also prompt restoration of local control.

Among the most important reference points in determining whether a school board has fulfilled its duties so that local control may be resumed are the factors set out in Green: student assignment, faculty assignment, facilities and resources, transportation, staff assignment, and extracurricular activities. In its discretion, a court conducting a unitary status hearing may con-



**So long as the district court's unitary status determination rests on a permissible view of the evidence, it must be affirmed.**

sider other relevant factors not mentioned in Green. We address the district court's consideration of each factor in turn, but only to determine whether "the district court's account of the evidence is plausible in light of the record viewed in its entirety."

### **Student assignment**

Student assignment is perhaps the most critical Green factor because state-mandated separation of pupils on the basis of race is the essence of the dual system. To determine whether a school was racially balanced or imbalanced, the district court adopted a plus/minus fifteen percent variance from the district-wide ratio of black to white students. However, the district court emphasized "that there is no level of compliance with the standard that is determinative." When schools are outside the variance, a "reasonable and supportable explanation[ ]" will suffice.

The district court did not err in adopting a plus/minus fifteen percent variance. Considering that the only variance ever approved by the district court in the course of the Swann litigation was a "plus 15%" from the district-wide average," the addition of a minus fifteen percent is reasonable. Moreover, the Supreme Court has permitted a "limited use . . . of mathematical ratios" by district courts, and much higher variances have been used to define desegregation. In sum, the

plus/minus fifteen percent variance is clearly within accepted standards, and provides a reasonable starting point in the unitary status determination.

### **CMS compliance**

The district court began by observing that since 1970, of the 126 schools in operation, "only twenty schools (16%) have had black student bodies higher than 15% above the district-wide ratio for more than three years, and only seventeen schools (13%) have had black student bodies lower than 15% below the district-wide ratio for more than three years." In addition, the district court found that CMS has not operated a single-race school since 1970.

The district court also turned to two desegregation indices: the dissimilarity index and the index of interracial exposure. The former "measures the degree of racial imbalance, and it is derived by comparing the racial composition of each school to the districtwide composition," and the latter measures "the average percent white in schools attended by black students, weighted by the proportion of black students in each school." According to the report of the plaintiff-intervenors' expert witness, Dr. David J. Armor, a dissimilarity value of twenty or below signifies "a highly balanced school system" and a score under thirty signifies "a substantially desegregated system." CMS's dissimilarity score was sixteen in 1980 and twenty-six in 1995. From this it is clear that CMS quickly desegregated in the 1970s and continues to maintain a "substantially desegregated system." The dissimilarity index also indicates that CMS has better racial balance than several comparable districts did when they were declared unitary.

The index of interracial exposure, like the dissimilarity index, shows that CMS has made great leaps of progress. A score of zero on the exposure index signifies total segregation, while a score of fifty or above indicates a "highly

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desegregated system.” Schools in CMS typically score above fifty, whereas before the desegregation order the schools’ scores hovered near twenty or below.

CMS and the Swann plaintiffs correctly point out that the data suggest that in recent years racial imbalance has increased in some schools. Aware of this trend, the district court made a number of findings on growth and demographic change in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area. The most revealing findings are as follows:

- The county population has increased from 354,656 in 1970 to 613,310 in 1997.

- In 1970 the school district was the forty-third largest in the nation and is today the twenty-third largest.

- Among cities with more than 500,000 people, Charlotte ranks second in population growth in the 1990s.

- The racial composition of the county has changed from seventy-six percent white and twenty-four percent black in 1970 to sixty-eight percent white, twenty-seven percent black, and five percent other in 1997.0

- The current racial composition of schoolchildren is fifty percent white, forty-two percent black, and eight percent other.

- As the county has become more suburban the inner city and nearby suburbs have lost large numbers of white residents as they spread farther out into the formerly rural sections of the county

- Some middle suburban communities that were once all white are now predominately black.

- The rural black population in the southern part of the county has remained relatively constant while the white population has tripled because of suburbanization.

These findings are supported by the report of the plaintiff-intervenors’ expert in demographics, Dr. William Clark. Accordingly, the district court concluded that “[t]here can be no doubt that demography and geography have

played the largest role in causing imbalance.”

Testimony from Dr. John Murphy, CMS’s superintendent from 1991 to 1995, corroborates the district court’s conclusion. Dr. Murphy testified that when he assumed his duties he “was quite concerned about the increasing difficulty in bringing about racial balance ... because of the demographic shifts that were occurring.” Population growth translated into more automobiles on the road, making increased busing impracticable because “the travel time to move youngsters from the suburbs into the city with the flow of rush hour traffic was a problem.” In the fall of 1991, CMS hired Dr. Michael J. Stolee to examine the problem and offer solutions. Dr. Stolee also concluded that CMS’s task “has been complicated by population growth,” and he recommended the adoption of a magnet schools program, which CMS promptly implemented.

The Supreme Court has dealt with similar population growth and shifting demographics in the context of unitary status. In *Freeman*, the court unequivocally stated that “racial imbalance . . . [is] not tantamount to a showing that the school district [is] in non-compliance with the decree or with its duties under the law.” *Brown I*, of course, does not mandate that racial balance be pursued in perpetuity. Once the original racial imbalance caused by a constitutional violation has been rectified, “the school district is under no duty to remedy imbalance that is caused by demographic factors.”

The Swann plaintiffs contend that consideration of demographics and the rationale of *Freeman* are misplaced because the growth and shifting demographics of DeKalb County, Georgia, the school district under court order in *Freeman*, exceeded that of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. While CMS’s growth rates and demographic shifts certainly do not equal those experienced in

DeKalb, we can find nothing in *Freeman* limiting its holding to the specific facts of DeKalb County or establishing DeKalb as the standard for measuring imbalance caused by demographic factors. On the contrary, the opinion speaks in general terms. The Supreme Court observed that in the United States “it is inevitable that the demographic makeup of school districts, based as they are on political subdivisions such as counties and municipalities, may undergo rapid change.” Mobility, the Court noted, “is a distinct characteristic of our society.”

Similarly, the Swann plaintiffs contend that unlike DeKalb County, Mecklenburg County has become more integrated as the black population has increased. This is simply not true. For example, a report prepared in 1992 by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Planning Staff for Chairman Arthur Griffin concluded that “Charlotte-Mecklenburg continues to be a city of segregated neighborhoods” with “[c]oncentrations of Black households . . . generally located in the central city.” (1992 student assignment plan stating that “housing across the county is not racially integrated.

Approximately 50% of all black students live within one district, while only 10% of white students reside in that district.”) Clearly, increased housing integration is not necessarily a corollary of African-American population growth. Hence, despite the Swann plaintiffs’ best efforts, *Freeman* cannot be distinguished into nothingness, nor does the standard of review permit this court to reweigh the evidence of the changes in CMS.

We also note that when confronted with growing imbalance in certain schools, the district court demanded cogent and supportable explanations from the plaintiff-intervenors, paying special attention to the former *de jure* schools still in use. Evidence presented at trial indicated that “[o]f the 16 former black schools that are still open, 13 are currently balanced

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and have been desegregated for periods ranging from 22 to 28 years. Of the 3 that currently exceed the +15% black variance, each has been balanced for at least 22 years.” Interestingly, of the seventy-two former white schools that are still open, fifteen are now majority black and were in balance for periods of twelve to twenty-five years.

In addition, Dr. Armor examined the seventeen schools in CMS that exceeded the plus fifteen percent variance for three or more years during the last decade. Sixteen of the seventeen were balanced for periods ranging from nineteen to twenty-six years, with one school experiencing balance for sixteen years. To the extent that CMS’s pupil reassignments could be assessed, Dr. Armor concluded that changes instituted by CMS were “attempts to maintain or restore racial balance in the face of overwhelming demographic growth and mobility.” Indeed, Dr. Armor concluded that imbalance had been reduced in several of the schools because CMS’s magnet program attracted white students from the outer reaches of the county.

Long periods of almost perfect compliance with the court’s racial balance guidelines, coupled with some imbalance in the wake of massive demographic shifts, strongly supports the district court’s finding that the present levels of imbalance are in no way connected with the de jure segregation once practiced in CMS. The evidence presented at trial adequately explained why a few schools have become imbalanced, and we can discern no evidence or omissions that indicate clear error has been committed in this regard.

### **Martin, unitary status**

The Swann plaintiffs also point to school sitings, transportation burdens, and school transfers as evidence that the growing imbalance is caused by state action rather than private choices, and that CMS has not complied with

the district court’s orders in good faith. In advancing their argument, the Swann plaintiffs rely chiefly on *Martin v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1979), in which a group of parents sought to enjoin CMS from reassigning over 4,000 students in order to maintain racial balance in certain schools. The plaintiffs in *Martin* based their position on *Pasadena City Board of Education v. Spangler* (1976), and *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* (1978). In the former case, the Supreme Court reaffirmed that district courts could not order a school district “to rearrange its attendance zones each year so as to ensure that the racial mix desired by the court was maintained in perpetuity,” and in the latter the Court struck down a medical school admissions policy that reserved sixteen of one hundred seats in the entering class for applicants who were “economically and/or educationally disadvantaged” and who were members of certain minority groups. The district court in *Martin* distinguished *Spangler* by observing that it was but a restatement of the Swann Court’s admonition about the use of racial quotas and that, unlike Pasadena City, CMS had not achieved racially neutral attendance patterns. As for the *Bakke* decision, the district court pointed out that no student in CMS was denied “an equal educational opportunity” and that the admissions policy in *Bakke* was implemented “against a backdrop devoid of specific judicial findings or administrative acknowledgments of the prior segregated status of the school system.”

Accordingly, the *Martin* court concluded that CMS’s reassignment of students was “within constitutional limits and should be upheld.” The district court took pains to ensure that its opinion would not be interpreted too broadly: “This order simply upholds the actions of the 1978 Board against the attacks by the plaintiffs.” In the course of the *Martin* opinion, the district court

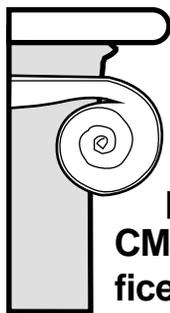
observed that CMS had fallen short in four areas: construction and location of facilities in parts of the county likely to enhance desegregation, placement of elementary and kindergarten grades in schools throughout the county, monitoring of student transfers so as to prevent resegregation, and allocation of the burdens of busing. However, the district court also noted that CMS had made great progress and that a return to the old system of segregation “has not tempted the present School Board, who are standing fast in their endeavor to run the schools according to law while providing quality education.”

In *Capacchione*, the district court correctly observed that “*Martin* was not a unitary status hearing,” and that because “the desegregation plan was still in its fledgling stages, the Court was inclined to keep the pressure on CMS.” The *Capacchione* court further observed that post-*Martin* changes in Charlotte-Mecklenburg counseled looking at the “concerns [of *Martin*] in a new light.” The district court’s interpretation of *Martin* is reasonable and in accord with the rule in this circuit that a district court, as a continuous institution, is “best able to interpret its own orders.” Moreover, the *Martin* order was issued thirteen years before the Supreme Court made clear in *Freeman* that the affirmative measures mandated by *Green* are not meant to remedy “private choices” that lead to resegregation. The state of the law and the understanding of duties upon school districts were far different when *Martin* was handed down. Hence, a number of assertions in *Martin* cannot be squared with the present state of the law. Ignoring the changes in Charlotte-Mecklenburg and in the law by erecting *Martin* as the framework for unitary status, as the Swann plaintiffs urged below, would defy common sense and run afoul of developments in the Supreme Court’s school desegregation jurisprudence. We will examine

the district court's Martin findings in turn.

## School siting

The district court found that CMS had not shirked its duties under the law with regard to school sitings. The record reveals that CMS has, to the extent practicable, continually endeavored to site schools in order to foster integration, and has adopted a policy of building schools in areas equally accessible to blacks and whites. Testimony of current board members indicated that in efforts to fulfill this policy, CMS has purchased property in low growth areas for school construction even though schools in predominantly white high growth areas were overcrowded. In 1992 CMS reaffirmed its siting policy and resolved that, "whenever possible," new schools would be built in areas that would "provide black student enrollment of not less than 10 percent from the census tracts serving the new school." The impetus behind the resolution was growth in the periphery of the county which the board speculated would continue patterns of housing segregation, thus making it more difficult to maintain racial balance in the schools. Evidence presented at trial indicated that the ten percent rule was destined for failure because it was not possible to implement the rule and still "meet the 60-minute bus ride limit." Nevertheless, extensive evidence was presented showing that CMS never sited schools in order to foster segregation and that "every effort was made to try to find school sites that would bring people together in balanced numbers." For example, CMS's executive director of planning and student placement testified that in siting schools CMS "looked at both African-American and all populations not only in the vicinity of the site, but in the entire district." So dedicated was CMS to siting schools in integrated areas that it contemplated refusing a gift of land for school use because the land was in a predominantly



**To the extent practicable, CMS did not sacrifice racial balance concerns to population growth.**

white area.

Faced with growth in the predominantly white regions of the far south and north, CMS was compelled to serve populations in those areas via school sitings. CMS's data show that in the late 1990s, student population was "growing at nearly 4,000 students per year," and consequently the board was "just trying to keep up" with the population explosion in building schools. Overcrowding was a problem, and in the late 1990s "the average high school expected to operate at 109 percent of its capacity." Even though CMS was forced to build schools at a rapid rate to serve an expanding student population, pupil assignment plans in which CMS described population growth as a "major consideration[ ]" are replete with efforts to improve racial balance. For example, the 1997-98 assignment plan highlighted the creation and expansion of several magnet programs specially designed to reduce the black ratio in a number of schools. To the extent practicable, CMS did not sacrifice racial balance concerns to population growth. Though the two often pulled CMS in different directions, the record indicates that the board coordinated racial balance and school sitings as best it could under the circumstances. The evidence does not indicate that the abandonment of the ten percent rule or other decisions regarding school siting were the result of a desire to perpetuate the dual school system or circumvent the district

court's orders.

CMS and the Swann plaintiffs, citing to prior orders, counter that the board has not done all that it could do in the area of school siting. Erection of such a standard, however, would effectively replace practicability with possibility. The former implies measures that can be reasonably implemented under the circumstances, while the latter omits the reasonableness requirement. For instance, it was possible for CMS to adhere to the ten percent rule while ignoring growth in the far north and south of the county. Youngsters would have been compelled to ride buses for long periods while traveling with the flow of rush hour traffic, but it was nonetheless possible to adhere to the ten percent rule. Of course, the practicability of a refusal to respond to growth in Charlotte-Mecklenburg is another matter.

In the same vein, the Swann plaintiffs contend that school siting decisions were a response to white flight, which is an impermissible reason for failing to comply with a desegregation order. Growth, of course, is far different from flight. And experts offered evidence of "the economic boom in the Charlotte Metropolitan area in the last decade." Charlotte-Mecklenburg is one of the most dynamic areas in the South; it is far different from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg of Swann, and much changed from that of Martin. In light of the growth in the county and a plethora of evidence demonstrating that the board used its best efforts to site schools in order to foster integration, the district court did not commit error when it concluded that there is no "continuing constitutional violation in the area of school siting."

## Burdens of busing

As for the burdens of busing, the district court found that in the most recent school year, 15,533 black students and 11,184 non-black students were bused for balancing purposes. As stated earlier, traffic patterns make busing sub-

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urban students into the inner city far more difficult than busing inner-city children into the suburbs. Though a disproportionate number of African-American students are bused, the growth, housing patterns, and traffic patterns support the district court's conclusion that the realities of the current situation should not block a unitary status determination.

**Student transfers**

Finally, Martin's concern with student transfers appears to have been based on the assumption that CMS would experience average growth. Courts are not omniscient, and the district court in 1979 could not have foreseen the changing demographics that would make student transfers the least of CMS's worries. In the present litigation, the district court observed "that CMS 'kept an eye on [magnet transfers] so that there wouldn't be a run on the bank so to speak from any one school.'" This finding is not clearly erroneous, nor can we discern the need for more findings on this issue in light of post-Martin changes.

In sum, the district court's findings on student assignment are "plausible in light of the record viewed in its entirety." The dual system of student assignment in CMS has been eradicated "to the extent practicable." The imbalance existing in some schools is not traceable to the former dual system or to renewed discriminatory actions, but rather is a result of growth and shifting demographics. Consequently, we hold that the district court's findings on student assignment are not clearly erroneous.

**Faculty assignment**

In examining faculty assignment, the district court again used a plus/minus fifteen percent variance. Of the 126 schools operating in CMS, the district court found that in 1997-98 only ten schools were out of balance. The Swann plaintiffs point out that this number grew to sixteen in

1998-99, but this means that a mere twelve percent of the schools were out of balance. This is a far cry from the dual system in which "most of the 24,000 [black students] ha[d] no white teachers." There is simply no evidence that CMS assigns black teachers to predominantly black schools and white teachers to predominantly white schools. Thus, the district court's conclusion that this Green factor has been satisfied is not clearly erroneous.

**Facilities and resources**

The Swann plaintiffs and CMS contend that the district court impermissibly shifted the burden of proof on this factor. As a result of the alleged error of law, CMS and the Swann plaintiffs contend that this issue must be remanded to the district court.

This court has previously made clear that "once a court has found an unlawful dual school system, [those alleging the existence of racial disparities] are entitled to the presumption that current disparities are causally related to prior segregation, and the burden of proving otherwise rests on the defendants." In this case, however, the district court noted that none of the prior orders entered in the long history of the Swann litigation had ever found racial disparities to exist with regard to school facilities and concluded that CMS and the Swann plaintiffs bore the burden of establishing discrimination with regard to facilities. In our view, this erroneous assignment of the burden of proof, which did not affect the manner in which the parties tried the case or otherwise prejudice their rights, is harmless and does not undermine the district court's factual conclusions regarding the facilities factor.

Immediately after assigning the burden to CMS and the Swann plaintiffs, the district court's order nonetheless summarized and weighed the facilities evidence presented by the parties. The district court carefully analyzed the testimony and report of Dr.

Dwayne Gardner, an expert witness for CMS. Dr. Gardner analyzed seventy-three schools – every identifiably black school in CMS and a sampling of balanced schools and predominantly white schools. Dr. Gardner measured the adequacy, safety, healthfulness, accessibility, flexibility, efficiency, expansibility, and appearance of the schools. Based on the inspection he grouped schools as follows: "0-44 (suggests replacement), 45-59 (needs major improvement), 60-74 (needs minor improvement), 75-89 (serves program needs), and 90-100 (exceptional quality)." The survey revealed that of the four schools that warranted replacement, two were majority white, and two were imbalanced black. Thirty-four schools fell into the "needs major improvement" category, of which sixteen were imbalanced black and eighteen identifiably white.

The district court determined that Dr. Gardner's testimony established that any current disparities were functions of the age of the facilities at issue, because different building standards apply when a new facility is constructed as compared to when an older facility is renovated or upgraded. In other words, the renovation of an older facility usually complies with the code under which the facility was built. Because most facilities in the predominately black inner city are older while facilities in the predominately white suburbs are newer, the inference is that differences in building standards tend to affect black students disproportionately. This does not amount to racial discrimination. Indeed, this practice applies regardless of the racial composition of the school. Thus, older schools that are predominately white – several of which were built in the 1920s – are likewise affected by this practice. Thus, the district court concluded from Dr. Gardner's testimony and report "that CMS's facilities needs are spread across the system without regard to the

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racial composition of its schools.”

The district court also considered the testimony of CMS’s assistant superintendent of building services, who testified that out of 108 schools in need of renovations, eighty-one percent were racially balanced or identifiably white. The district court concluded that this witness’s testimony likewise demonstrated that the deficiencies in CMS’s facilities were unrelated to the former de jure system.

Finally, the court considered CMS’s track record in renovating old facilities, praising its practice of allocating funds on a per-pupil basis and noting that “CMS has spent a large portion of [its] bond money on improving schools in predominantly black areas.”

After an extensive discussion of this evidence, the court made the following finding of fact with regard to facilities: “Just as Judge McMillan found thirty years ago, the Court finds today that inequities in facilities exist throughout the system regardless of the racial makeup of the school. These disparities are generally the result of the relative ages of the facilities, combined with an ongoing lack of funding and the need to accommodate unprecedented growth.”

This finding is clearly determinative of the question of unitary status as to facilities, regardless of which party carried the burden of proof. That is, the district court, after carefully considering and weighing all the evidence presented on this factor, concluded that any disparity as to the condition of the facilities that might exist was not caused by any intentional discrimination by CMS, but instead was a function of the age and location of the facilities and the ever-present problem of allocating all too scarce funds. Even if the district court had assigned the burden of proof to the plaintiff-intervenors, this factual finding would have compelled a ruling in their favor. In fact, the district court acknowledged as much, stating “that the Plaintiff Intervenors

have proven, to the extent possible, the absence of intent and causation.”

Therefore, because the district court’s findings, which were based on the court’s weighing of all of the relevant evidence presented at trial, would have yielded the same conclusion under a proper assignment of the burden of proof, any error with regard to the burden of proof is harmless.

Because any error associated with the burden of proof is harmless, the only question that remains is whether the district court’s factual findings about the facilities are clearly erroneous. Though the evidence could have been weighed differently on this factor, “[w]here there are two permissible views of the evidence, the factfinder’s choice between them cannot be clearly erroneous.” In 1969, the district court found that there was no constitutional violation in the “quality of school buildings and facilities.” The Capacchione court found that this remains true today, and the evidence as a whole indicates that this finding is not clearly erroneous.

### Transportation

During the 1998 school year, five out of every six students in CMS rode a school bus. The parties do not dispute the district court’s finding that “CMS provides free bus transportation to all students who do not live within a mile and a half of their schools.” The focus of the Swann plaintiffs’ argument on this factor deals with the Martin opinion. As previously discussed, Martin does not provide the framework for a unitary status determination and the district court’s interpretation of Martin, along with the finding that the present state of busing “may be about the best CMS can do,” does not constitute error.

### Staff assignment

The district court, noting that findings of discrimination in school staffing were never made, concluded that CMS has complied

with its constitutional duties. The parties point this court to no contrary evidence, nor have we discovered such in the record. Therefore, we hold that the district court’s findings regarding the fifth Green factor are not clearly erroneous.

### Extracurriculars

The district court concluded that there was no discrimination or vestiges of discrimination with regard to extracurricular activities. The evidence presented at trial showed that the ratios of blacks and whites participating in extracurricular activities, though varying somewhat from year to year, is approximately equal. Areas where there are disparities were not shown to be linked to the former dual system. For example, blacks often outnumber whites in holding elective offices in student government, but whites have a higher level of representation in honors programs. No evidence is found in the record to indicate that CMS somehow pushes African-Americans toward student government and away from honors programs. Consequently, the district court’s conclusion that CMS has satisfied this Green factor is not clearly erroneous.

### Teacher quality

The district court found that there was no discrimination in the quality of teaching. The Swann plaintiffs contend that this finding is clearly erroneous because students in imbalanced African-American schools are more likely to have inexperienced teachers. This “experience gap,” to the extent it exists, is minuscule. The district court found that “teachers in imbalanced-black schools had 0.7 to 1.3 fewer years experience than the district averages and had 1.6 to 2.9 fewer years experience than teachers in imbalanced-white schools.” To use middle school teachers as an example, the statistics reveal that the average middle school teacher in an imbalanced African-American school had 8.2 years experience versus

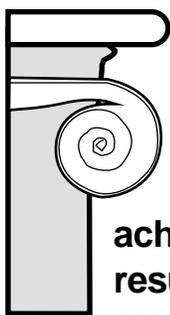
9.8 years for his counterpart in an imbalanced white school. *Id.* These numbers clearly support a finding of equality rather than disparity, and cannot undermine the district court’s conclusion on this factor.

The district court also pointed to evidence indicating that experience does not necessarily relate to competency. For example, according to former Superintendent Murphy, it is not uncommon to have “excellent first-year teachers” and “very weak 35th-year teachers.” Other witnesses observed that the newer teachers had better “knowledge of various teaching strategies” and were more comfortable with diverse classrooms.

The Swann plaintiffs also assert that imbalanced African-American schools have fewer teachers with advanced degrees. For instance, in imbalanced black high schools only thirty-one percent of the teachers held advanced degrees, while forty-six percent of the teachers in imbalanced white high schools held advanced degrees. As it was with teacher experience, testimony was offered establishing that the number of degrees a teacher possesses does not necessarily translate into competence or quality instruction. According to former Superintendent Murphy, “the degree level was not a significant indicator of getting better performance on the part of the teacher.” Expert reports submitted by the plaintiff-intervenors also indicated that there is “no significant relationship” between black achievement and teacher education levels. In sum, the district court’s conclusion that African-American students receive equal access to quality teachers is not clearly erroneous.

### Student achievement

The district court found that the existence of an achievement gap between black and white students was not a vestige of the dual system or evidence of discrimination in the current operation of CMS. This was an area of immense dis-



**... if low African-American achievement is a result of the former de jure system, it must be eliminated ... to the extent that low achievement is linked to other factors, it is beyond the reach of the court’s authority**

agreement at trial, and the parties presented a mountain of data on this subject. Though the Fourteenth Amendment guarantees equal protection but not equal outcomes, if low African-American achievement is a result of the former de jure system, it must be eliminated to the extent practicable. Conversely, to the extent that low achievement is linked to other factors, it is beyond the reach of the court’s authority. Most courts of appeals confronting this issue, including this court, have declined to consider the achievement gap as a vestige of discrimination or as evidence of current discrimination.

The plaintiff-intervenors’ expert witness, Dr. Armor, presented evidence indicating that there is no correlation between African-American performance and the racial balance of schools. For example, Dr. Armor’s studies showed that African-American students in the third through fifth grades attending schools sixteen to twenty-five percent African-American scored the same on standardized tests as their counterparts in schools seventy-five percent black or greater. Similarly, African-American students in the sixth through eighth grades attending schools sixteen percent black or less scored the

same on standardized tests as their counterparts in schools seventy-five percent black or greater.

In order to shed light on the true causes of the achievement gap, Dr. Armor turned to socioeconomic factors. The data revealed startling differences between black and white children in CMS.

Average black family income is \$31,000 compared to \$59,000 for whites, and only 15 [percent] of black parents are college graduates, compared to 58 percent for white parents. A huge poverty gap is also revealed, with 63 percent of black students on free lunch compared to only 9 percent of white students. Finally, 83 percent of white students have both parents at home, compared to only 42 percent for black students.

According to Dr. Armor, the socioeconomic factors plus the second-grade scores, which are the earliest available, explain “nearly 80 percent of the reading gap and over 70 percent of the math gap.” Former Superintendent Murphy testified that in his experience “[p]oor students come behind and stay that way. And in Charlotte, a majority of poor students happen to be African-American.” Dan Saltrick, former assistant superintendent for instructional services, also testified that in his experience low student test scores related to parental support which in turn was “a matter of . . . socioeconomic levels.” While socioeconomic disparities between black and white pupils are troubling, they are not the result of CMS’s actions or inactions and therefore are beyond the scope of the original desegregation order. Accordingly, the district court did not clearly err in finding that the achievement gap between black and white students is not a vestige of past discrimination or evidence of present discrimination.

### Student discipline

The district court found “that any disparities that exist in the area of discipline are not causally related to the dual system.” In none of the court’s prior orders is

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there any indication that CMS has ever discriminated in meting out punishment for disruptive students. However, recent statistics show that of the 13,206 students disciplined from 1996-98, sixty-six percent were African-American. As the district court noted, “disparity does not, by itself, constitute discrimination.” The idea that CMS should have a disciplinary quota is patently absurd, and there is no evidence in the record that CMS targets African-American students for discipline. Instead, the evidence indicates that CMS has adopted guidelines whereby students receive the same level of punishment for certain offenses to ensure that the amount of punishment will not vary from school to school. A student charged with a disciplinary infraction may also appeal the charge “and may assert that the charge was due to racial bias.” There is simply no evidence in the record that CMS treats African-American students differently in disciplinary matters. Hence, the district court’s conclusion that the disciplinary disparities are unrelated to the former de jure system is not clearly erroneous.

### Good faith

Lastly, the district court found that CMS has complied with the desegregation decree in good faith. Seven factors supported the district court’s good-faith finding: (1) no further relief has been sought since the district court removed the case from the active docket in 1975; (2) CMS has gone above and beyond the court’s orders by continually striving to achieve balance even when the imbalance was unconnected to the dual system; (3) the board has been open to community input and sought community support for its integrative efforts; (4) the board has repeatedly reaffirmed its commitment to desegregation through various resolutions; (5) African-Americans currently occupy four of the nine seats on the school board, including the chair; (6) the board’s actions over the

past thirty years do not evince discriminatory motives; and (7) “no evidence has been presented that school authorities were guilty of easily correctable errors.”

Testimony from former board members indicated that the court’s order has been “institutionalized,” and that the board “always stuck to what the rules were.” Former Superintendent Murphy testified that when he arrived in Charlotte-Mecklenburg he found a “unique” environment where “everybody wanted to make sure that their schools were racially balanced.” In 1992, Dr. Stolee suggested a magnet plan to increase integration, and, in the course of his recommendations, observed that “[f]or the last twenty years, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg community have, in good faith, complied with the orders of the court.” He further observed “that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board and community have a great deal of pride in the fact that they successfully met a challenge and made the solution work.”

Of course, both in the district court and in appellate arguments, current CMS officials engaged in much self-recrimination and claimed that they had not pursued the dismantlement of the dual system with the requisite zeal. Right on cue, the Swann plaintiffs describe this case as “unique” because CMS “has acknowledged its own failure to comply with specific directives” of the district court. The district court gave little weight to CMS’s assertions that the board had not put forth enough effort, and the evidence presented at trial amply supports the district court in this regard. Former Superintendent Murphy testified that despite a report indicating that CMS was unitary and his belief that CMS “w[as] definitely in compliance,” no effort was made to dissolve the court order. Dr. Murphy gave three reasons for the avoidance of a unitary status hearing. First, he advised board members that the court

hearing would be “a long, drawn-out process which would cost millions of dollars, and that would be money taken away from the instructional program.” Second, Dr. Murphy feared that if CMS was declared unitary “we would not be eligible for federal funding for our magnet schools.” Finally, Dr. Murphy thought it best to remain under court order so CMS could continue to racially balance schools even though the de jure violation had been remedied.

Dr. Susan Purser, the current associate superintendent of education services of CMS, expressed a similar desire for CMS to remain under court order. Though Dr. Purser testified that she believed that the school board, superintendent, and administration were dedicated to enhancing educational opportunities for all of CMS’s students, regardless of race, she nonetheless expressed a preference for court supervision. Dr. Purser pointed out that the current “Board has only a limited time, because these are elected positions,” and that over time “superintendents will change, [and] the people involved in [CMS] will change.” At this point in the cross examination, counsel asked Dr. Purser: “But you don’t know what any future School Board or administration will do either way, do you?” Dr. Purser responded: “That’s exactly my point.” Dr. Purser’s testimony and that of Dr. Murphy exemplify why the Supreme Court has stressed that “federal supervision of local school systems was intended as a temporary measure to remedy past discrimination.” The district court’s desegregation orders were not intended to continue after CMS remedied the de jure violation, nor were they intended to suspend the democratic process with no prospect of restoration. Yet the orders have been institutionalized to the point that CMS officials cannot imagine life without them. Once a yoke meant to steer CMS towards compliance with the Constitution, the orders are now used by CMS officials as

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mechanisms for the attainment of different goals. In truth, CMS officials have little desire for a unitary status determination and are struggling to keep the orders firmly in place.

Ironically, CMS's clinging to the temporary desegregation orders buttresses the district court's finding that it is unlikely "CMS would return to an intentionally-segregative system." If CMS will go to such lengths to keep the court's orders in place so that it may continue racial balancing and other policies, it is unthinkable that CMS will attempt to revive the dual system. Accordingly, the district judge's finding of good faith is not clearly erroneous.

### **CMS's remedial plan**

As a response to the plaintiff-intervenors' push for unitary status, CMS developed a "remedial plan" addressing many of the Green factors and other ancillary factors. The district court dismissed the remedial plan as a "litigation strategy" plan and declined to consider it. CMS and the Swann plaintiffs characterize the district court's treatment of the remedial plan as a fundamental error of law that requires reversal of the unitary status determination.

First, CMS and the Swann plaintiffs aver that the district court misconstrued the test for unitary status. Adopting the test crafted by the panel opinion, CMS and the Swann plaintiffs assert that a district court must consider (1) what a school district has done, and (2) what a school district may do in the future. Because the district court did not undertake the latter inquiry as to the remedial plan, CMS and the Swann plaintiffs argue that the district court's order must be reversed.

This proffered two-part test is divined from Supreme Court cases which have instructed district courts to ask "whether the Board ha[s] complied in good faith with the desegregation decree since it was entered, and whether the ves-

tiges of past discrimination ha[ve] been eliminated to the extent practicable."

While we agree with the first prong of the test, we do not agree that examining "whether the vestiges of past discrimination ha[ve] been eliminated to the extent practicable," requires a district court – as a matter of law – to consider a remedial plan conceived, drafted, and offered by one of the parties during the lawsuit as an obvious defense to it. The plain meaning of the relevant language is that in some desegregation cases simple compliance with the court's orders is not enough for meaningful desegregation to take place. For example, a decree entered in the 1960s or 1970s could have underestimated the extent of the remedy required, or changes in the school district could have rendered the decree obsolete. In either case, a district court must look beyond mere compliance with the original decree and ask whether the vestiges of the dual system have been eliminated to the extent practicable. In the present case, the district court undertook such an inquiry. Not only did the district court address compliance, but it also looked beyond the original decree and examined how the extensive changes in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area have affected the dismantling of the former dual system. Hence, the district court was not required under *Dowell* and *Freeman* to have considered CMS's eleventh-hour remedial plan.

Likewise, the district court did not run afoul of Federal Rule of Evidence 402 when it refused to consider the remedial plan. Rule 402, of course, declares that "[a]ll relevant evidence is admissible." Even relevant evidence may be excluded, however, when its probative value is substantially outweighed by considerations of the needless presentation of cumulative evidence. And CMS's remedial plan was certainly cumulative, citing and summarizing several expert reports which had been

admitted into evidence. For example, the plan's discussion of faculty assignment is based on the reports of Dr. William Trent, Dr. Robert Peterkin, and Dr. Roslyn Mickelson; the plan's discussion of facilities is based on Dr. Gardner's report; the plan's discussion of the achievement gap between blacks and whites is based on the reports of Dr. Trent, Dr. Peterkin, and Dr. Mickelson; and the plan's student assignment discussion is based on Dr. Gordon Foster's report.

All of the aforementioned reports were admitted into evidence and the authors of the reports testified at the hearing and were subject to cross-examination. Hence, much of the remedial plan was cumulative, providing the district court with but a rehashing of expert reports and testimony.

To the extent that the remedial plan contained relevant evidence appearing nowhere else in the record, we hold that the exclusion of such evidence was harmless.

According to Federal Rule of Civil Procedure 61, a "court at every stage of the proceeding must disregard any error or defect in the proceeding which does not affect the substantial rights of the parties." Listing myriad deficiencies, objectives, and strategies, the thirty-one page remedial plan is often short on specifics. Considering the amount of evidence presented on every aspect of CMS's operations during other phases of the two-month bench trial, we cannot hold that the exclusion of the remedial plan affected CMS's substantial rights. Because the exclusion of the remedial plan in no way renders the judgment below suspect, the district court's treatment of the plan cannot support reversal.

Pursuant to the foregoing, we affirm the district court's unitary status determination in toto. The district court's findings on the Green factors and the ancillary factors are bereft of clear error and we cannot discern any error of law affecting the substantial rights of the parties. After more

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than three decades of federal court supervision, CMS has complied in good faith with the mandate of Brown embodied in the district court's desegregation orders to achieve a unitary school system. The dual system has been dismantled and the vestiges of prior discrimination have been eliminated to the extent practicable.

This is not to say that CMS is a perfect school system – it is not. Like school systems across the nation, CMS faces an expanding pupil population, aging facilities, and a scarcity of funds. These difficulties, however, are not vestiges of the former de jure system and therefore do not have constitutional implications. Considering CMS's exemplary efforts in eradicating the segregated school system, we are confident that de jure segregation is history.

### **Magnet schools**

I turn now to Capacchione's challenge to CMS's 1992 magnet schools plan. Specifically, Capacchione contends that his daughter Cristina was unconstitutionally denied admission to a magnet school program on account of her race. Capacchione does not argue that race should not have been a factor in the magnet admissions process, but that the inflexible quotas, which operated to leave seats in these specialized schools vacant despite long waiting lists, went beyond what was permissible under prior court orders and the Constitution.

As noted previously, CMS operated its schools in nearly perfect racial balance for almost twenty years under a pupil assignment plan, adopted by the board and approved by the district court in 1974, which primarily utilized paired elementary schools, satellite attendance zones, a feeder system, and three experimental "optional schools." In 1991, however, CMS hired Dr. Stolee to examine racial imbalance that was being caused anew by the demographic shifts and population growth in Mecklenburg County.



**After more than three decades of federal court supervision, CMS has complied in good faith with the mandate of Brown embodied in the district court's desegregation orders to achieve a unitary school system.**

The result of Dr. Stolee's labors was a new pupil assignment plan, entitled "CMS Student Assignment Plan: A New Generation of Excellence." This new plan emphasized the use of magnet schools, which would allow CMS to phase out the unpopular paired elementary schools. Magnet schools, many of which were located in predominantly black neighborhoods, offered a specialized curriculum or innovative instructional styles not found in the other schools in the system.

Former Superintendent Murphy oversaw implementation of the Stolee plan and testified that the magnet program was adopted because CMS "wanted to attract more white youngsters into the inner city schools" in order to meet CMS's racial-balance goals. Dr. Stolee observed in his report that "Charlotte-Mecklenburg has had a long and successful experience with mandatory school assignments," but that in order to combat demographic shifts CMS should adopt a plan based on voluntarism. A desegregation plan using magnet schools, according to Dr. Stolee, would "give each parent an opportunity to make a choice between a school serving the area in which the family resides, a school in some other

area, or a school offering a very specific attractive program."

Dr. Stolee also recognized that the magnet-centered plan would be a dramatic shift from the prior desegregation plan which featured paired elementary schools, satellite attendance zones, and a feeder system. Thus, as part of the plan, he recommended that CMS secure approval from the district court before making any changes. Indeed, Dr. Stolee's "RECOMMENDATION #1," out of forty-four, read: "THE SCHOOL BOARD, THROUGH LEGAL COUNSEL, SHOULD APPROACH THE FEDERAL COURT TO SECURE APPROVAL TO CHANGE THE COURT-ORDERED DESEGREGATION PLAN."

This recommendation was consistent with the prior district court order directing CMS to apply to the district court "before making any material departure" from the approved desegregation plan. However, CMS ignored Dr. Stolee's advice and the district court's instruction, choosing instead to withhold these changes in the desegregation plan from the district court.

The crux of the problem with CMS's magnet school plan is its admissions process. As aptly described by the district court, it operates as follows:

At the start of the process, CMS first fills seats with preferences based on whether the applicant lives in close proximity to the school and whether the applicant has any siblings in the school. CMS then fills the remaining seats by selecting students from a black lottery and a non-black lottery until the precise racial balance is achieved.

As originally explained to the board, the plan sought a balance of sixty percent white and forty percent black in the magnet schools with a plus or minus fifteen percent deviation. Unfortunately, CMS opted for a strict ratio of sixty percent white and forty percent black, and decreed in its 1992 student

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assignment plan that magnet “slots reserved for one race will not be filled by students of another race.” The result of this policy was that if a sufficient number of blacks or whites did not apply and fill the seats allotted to their respective races, then those seats would be left vacant. Though some exceptions were made, Superintendent Eric Smith testified that CMS generally adhered to the policy.

The district court appropriately examined the magnet schools through a pre-unitary status lens, observing “that the current litigation started not as a petition for unitary status but as a discrimination suit arising out of Cristina Capacchione’s denial of admission to a magnet school based on her race.” The district court recognized that school officials acting pursuant to a desegregation order were immune from liability for actions taken consistent with that order. However, the district court concluded that the use of magnet schools had never been approved and that the rigid racial limitations of the magnet admissions policy were “beyond the scope of the Court’s mandate.” The district court then subjected the admissions policy to strict scrutiny, holding that the policy violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment because it was not narrowly tailored to achieve the compelling state interest of remedying past discrimination. This court reviews the district court’s findings of fact for clear error and its legal conclusions de novo.

### Immunity

I begin with the question of whether CMS officials are entitled to immunity because their actions in adopting and implementing the Stolee magnet program in 1992 were taken pursuant to and were consistent with the desegregation orders and opinions issued by the district court and Supreme Court in the early 1970s. In the main, CMS asserts that it is entitled to immunity for its act of implement-

ing the 1992 magnet schools program without court approval because the prior desegregation orders authorized the use of “optional schools” and a racial balance goal for filling them. Like the district court, I conclude that the magnet schools plan, as implemented, was not authorized by the prior court orders and that, for the reasons stated hereafter, the CMS officials are not entitled to immunity.

### Magnet-centered

As an initial matter, I note that prior court orders did not countenance implementation of a desegregation plan based primarily on magnet schools. Never was CMS given *carte blanche* to adopt such a program absent court review and approval. CMS counters that a magnet-centered plan was permissible insofar as the district court approved the establishment of a few experimental optional schools in 1974 as part of a plan utilizing paired elementary schools, satellite attendance zones, and a feeder system. What CMS fails to recognize is that optional schools were but a small part of the plan approved in 1974, likely because the district court was very skeptical about their efficacy as a desegregation technique. In the course of its order, the district court noted that the history of optional schools was marked by “failure” in a number of regards and warned CMS to be cautious in creating them. Consequently, CMS began with three experimental optional schools in 1974 and increased the number to only six by the early 1990s.

The optional schools created in the wake of the 1974 order placed more “emphasis on open or traditional education than normally offered in conventional schools.” The optional schools’ traditional programs “offer[ed] an enriched and highly structured education,” whereas the open programs offered a “student-centered” environment that “encouraged [students] to take responsibility for

their behavior and for their own learning.” The optional schools approved by the 1974 order were not as diverse and specialized as the magnet school program implemented in 1992. The program suggested by Dr. Stolee offered schools specializing in traditional and open educational methods and created specialized schools featuring the Montessori method; science, mathematics, and technology; foreign language immersion; learning immersion programs for young children; enhanced education for academically gifted students; and communication studies programs. However, both the optional schools and the magnet schools were designed to achieve the same end result – the attraction of students to a school in a particular location by using a specialized curriculum or teaching technique. Thus, Dr. Stolee, in recommending the magnet program in 1992, observed that CMS, via its optional schools, “had some experience in such specialized schools.”

Despite the district court’s 1970 directive that CMS obtain court approval for material modifications to the court-imposed desegregation plan, the court’s skepticism of optional schools, the approval process that took place in the ensuing years, and Dr. Stolee’s specific recommendation in 1992 that CMS seek court approval for the new magnet schools program, CMS inexplicably chose not to return to the district court to obtain approval of the magnet schools plan.

At appellate argument before the entire court, CMS contended that the language in the 1970 order requiring court approval for material departures was superceded by the 1974 order. CMS points to no language in the 1974 order supporting this argument and its repeated citations to and reliance on pre-1974 orders regarding other aspects of this case further call into doubt this new line of argument. Moreover, the 1974 order made clear that “[e]xcept as modified herein, all

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previous orders of court remain in effect.” Hence, the 1970 order’s requirement that CMS obtain leave of court “before making any material departure from any specific requirement set out in the order” remained binding on school officials.

Nevertheless, I recognize that magnet schools are frequently used by school districts under a desegregation order, and that the district court “encouraged [CMS officials] to use their full ‘know-how’ and resources to attain” a desegregated school system. Indeed, the plaintiff-intervenors’ own expert has touted magnet programs as an “effective way to attract sizable numbers of white students to predominately minority schools.” Thus, a magnet schools program, properly implemented, can no doubt be an effective desegregation tool. However, a conclusion that CMS was free to adopt any form of magnet school program it might wish to see in place does not flow from this general proposition.

I must forcefully disagree with CMS’s contention that the mention of optional schools in the 1974 order provided legal cover for the implementation of an assignment plan depending almost entirely on magnet schools. The portions of the district court order authorizing “optional schools” could perhaps be read in isolation as authorizing CMS’s use of “magnet schools” in more diverse, specialized areas, but the order did not authorize CMS to unilaterally abandon pairing, satellites, and feeders in exchange for a magnet-centered plan. Despite the import of the 1974 order, and without even a nod to the district court, CMS in 1992 abandoned the approved desegregation plan in favor of magnets. By the end of the decade CMS had created fifty-eight magnet programs – a far cry from the six optional schools in operation in the school year just prior to the adoption of the Stolee plan. CMS describes this abandonment of the prior plan as but an expansion of

the approved use of optional schools. Clearly, this “expansion” was in reality a substantial restructuring and cannot be squared with the unambiguous directives of prior orders.

### Strict ratios

Even if I could conclude that a magnet-centered plan was permitted under prior court orders, the plan implemented by CMS is nonetheless ultra vires because it combines a rigid ratio of sixty percent white and forty percent black with a policy decreeing that “slots reserved for one race will not be filled by students of another race.”

In 1970, the district court issued a desegregation order to CMS, noting that the order was “not based upon any requirement of ‘racial balance.’” The court reiterated “that efforts should be made to reach a 71-29 ratio in the various schools so that there will be no basis for contending that one school is racially different from the others, but . . . that variations from the norm may be unavoidable.” On appeal, the Supreme Court affirmed the guidelines set forth in the district court’s order and also addressed the subject of racial quotas.

With regard to the district court’s goal of achieving a racial balance of seventy-one percent white and twenty-nine percent black, the Court took care to note that “[t]he constitutional command to desegregate schools does not mean that every school in every community must always reflect the racial composition of the school system as a whole.” But central to the issue now before us, the Court held that had the district court “require[d], as a matter of substantive constitutional right, any particular degree of racial balance or mixing, that approach would be disapproved and we would be obliged to reverse. The goal was upheld, only upon the condition that “use made of mathematical ratios was no more than a starting point in the process of shaping a remedy, rather than an inflexible require-

ment.”

Just two years after the Supreme Court, in this very case, made clear that strict ratios were unacceptable, the district court, in a carefully worded order permitting CMS to create optional schools, approved an intentionally flexible enrollment formula of “about or above 20% black students.” The district court recognized that the “actual enrollment of the optional school may have to be guided by its racial composition and by the number drawn from each other school area, not by considerations of space and program only.” Additionally, the district court’s order directed that “[r]eassignments to optional schools must not jeopardize the racial composition of any other school.” These modifications, however, at no time set a racial ratio of the type disapproved of by the district court in its earlier orders and by the Supreme Court in its 1971 review of the district court’s 1970 order.

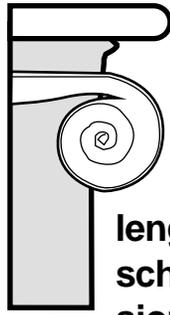
CMS asserts that the inflexible racial limits adopted in the 1992 magnet-centered plan were countenanced by the 1974 order discussing optional schools. In making this argument, CMS ignores the district court’s choice of words in the 1974 order (“about or above 20% black students”), and points to an attachment to the order designated as Exhibit A. This exhibit, a proposed pupil assignment plan drafted by CMS and a citizens advisory group, called for optional school enrollment “at or above approximately a 20% black ratio.” From this language, CMS concludes that strict quotas were permitted. CMS’s concentration on just a portion of the relevant language (“at or above”) edits out the word “approximately,” which does not suggest rigidity. Even if Exhibit A could be read as requiring rigid quotas, CMS disregards the fact that the district court approved the guidelines “subject to the further conditions stated” in the 1974 order. With the Supreme Court’s admonition about strict quotas in

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mind, the district court chose its language carefully, observing that optional schools should “have about or above 20% black students.” Hence, it is the district court’s understanding and modification of the pupil assignment plan that controls, not CMS’s tortured reading. Under a just construction, it is clear that the 1974 order did not approve a use of race to the extent that CMS could deny eager applicants an otherwise available slot in a magnet program solely on account of the applicant’s race. Both the district court and the Supreme Court in this very case consistently rejected the use of such rigid racial quotas.

I also find no authorization for the board’s adoption of the magnet schools program in the Supreme Court’s 1971 approval in Swann of a majority-to-minority transfer policy that would prevent, for example, an African-American child in a majority white school from transferring to a majority black school because the transfer would increase the degree of segregation in the affected schools. Because the majority-to-minority transfer policy, like the magnet admissions policy, prevents a child from enrolling in the public school of his choice, CMS argues that the magnet admissions policy is permissible. By definition, however, CMS’s specialized magnet programs are not tantamount to conventional public schools. While a child denied a transfer from one conventional school to another still receives the same general education, a child denied admission to a specialized magnet program does not receive a similar benefit in a conventional school. In other words, an education in a magnet school offering, for example, foreign language immersion, is not interchangeable with an education in a conventional public school. Hence, the effect of the magnet admissions policy is far different from the majority-to-minority transfer policy.

Unfortunately, the end result of the challenged magnet schools



**Unfortunately, the end result of the challenged magnet schools admissions policy is placement of racial quotas ahead of educating students – an inappropriate result nowhere countenanced in the district court’s orders or in the Supreme Court’s desegregation decisions.**

admissions policy is placement of racial quotas ahead of educating students – an inappropriate result nowhere countenanced in the district court’s orders or in the Supreme Court’s desegregation decisions. In fact, Brown I struck down segregated schooling because children were denied equal educational opportunities. While school boards were permitted to use race in assigning students in order to convert to a unitary system, neither the Brown opinions nor the district court orders implementing them ever contemplated that remedial use of race, like the old dual system, would deny some students educational opportunities solely because of their race. Indeed, in bringing suit in 1965, the Swann plaintiffs, in accord with the Brown opinions, simply asked that CMS convert “into a unitary nonracial system wherein the educational opportunities offered by [CMS] are made available to students without regard to race or color.”

An admissions policy that uses rigid racial quotas to deny an available, unclaimed slot in a specialized magnet school to a child,

whether black or white, on account of the child’s race cannot be squared with the district court’s orders or the Supreme Court’s desegregation decisions. Since 1971 it has been perfectly clear that mathematical ratios may be used as “a starting point in the process of shaping a remedy,” but not as “an inflexible requirement.” The district court took heed of this admonition in 1974 when it permitted the creation of optional schools with “about or above 20% black students.” However, CMS in 1992 ran afoul of the rule announced by the Supreme Court when it crafted strict racial ratios designed to leave open magnet school seats empty, rather than permitting waitlisted students to compete for the slots. Because nothing short of intellectual gymnastics can transform the clear meaning of the Supreme Court’s Swann opinion or the district court’s 1974 order into vehicles countenancing the rigid use of racial ratios, I agree with the district court that the policy is ultra vires and that CMS officials are not entitled to immunity.

### Equal protection

Having determined that the CMS officials are not entitled to immunity for the implementation of the strict race-based magnet school assignment policy, I now turn to the question of whether the officials’ act of implementing the policy without prior court approval, albeit while under an order to desegregate schools, runs afoul of the Equal Protection clause. I would hold that it does.

Under the Fourteenth Amendment, “[n]o State shall . . . deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” By guaranteeing equal protection, the Amendment recognizes that “[d]istinctions between citizens solely because of their ancestry are by their very nature odious to a free people whose institutions are founded upon the doctrine of equality.” The Supreme Court has refused to make excep-

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tions for so-called “benign” racial classifications, and the Court has made clear that “all racial classifications, imposed by whatever federal, state, or local governmental actor, must be analyzed by a reviewing court under strict scrutiny.” To survive strict scrutiny, CMS’s use of race in the magnet admissions program “must (1) serve a compelling governmental interest and (2) be narrowly tailored to achieve that interest.” CMS avers that the magnet admissions policy was adopted to remedy the effects of the dual school system previously operated in Mecklenburg County. Without question, remedying the effects of past discrimination is a compelling state interest.

In reviewing whether a policy is narrowly tailored to serve a compelling state interest, a court considers factors such as:

- (1) the necessity of the policy and the efficacy of alternative race neutral policies;
- (2) the planned duration of the policy;
- (3) the relationship between the numerical goal and the percentage of minority group members in the relevant population;
- (4) the flexibility of the policy, including the provision of waivers if the goal cannot be met; and
- (5) the burden of the policy on innocent third parties.

Like the district court, I would hold that the CMS magnet admissions policy is not narrowly tailored to the compelling interest of remedying past discrimination.

First, the magnet admissions policy was not necessary to comply with the court’s order to dismantle the dual educational system. CMS had a number of options available to it that would not have deprived children, solely on account of their race, an available seat in a specialized magnet program. Instead, CMS opted for rigid racial limits that were clearly prohibited by the district court’s orders and the Supreme Court’s desegregation decisions. Nor is there evidence in the record that added flexibility or a waiver provi-

sion would have undermined the use of magnet schools as a desegregation technique. The evidence simply does not reveal that the magnet admissions policy used was the only efficacious option available to CMS.

Second, this circuit has emphasized that “[t]he use of racial preferences must be limited so that they do not outlast their need; they may not take on a life of their own.” Like the district court, I can find “no mention of the duration that CMS would use racially segregated lotteries, vacancies, and waiting lists.” In light of CMS’s desire to remain under court order for the indefinite future, the lack of a duration for the magnet admissions policy is not surprising. CMS was apparently content, in a number of instances, to leave available magnet seats empty despite the waiting lists.

Third, I agree with the district court that “the 60-40 numerical goal is related to the relevant population, i.e., the racial composition of schoolchildren in CMS.” However, there is no evidence that CMS considered the “practicability of achieving this precise ratio in every magnet school,” or the very real danger that magnet schools would be underutilized because seats would be left open despite an abundance of applicants. The result of the admissions policy is but another indication that the CMS administration, in the words of former Superintendent Murphy, “was more focused on balance than on [educational] outcomes.”

Fourth, the district court aptly described the inflexibility in the magnet admissions policy: “The Court is hard-pressed to find a more restrictive means of using race than a process that results in holding seats vacant while long waiting lists full of eager applicants are virtually ignored.” The policy is indeed “restrictive,” but it also borders on obduracy. The policy contained no written waiver provision which, once again, shows a lack of concern that these

highly specialized schools could and would be underutilized.

Finally, the innocent parties affected are children denied magnet slots solely because of their race and parents who “must wait for months without knowing where their children eventually will be placed.” A child’s education is one of the greatest concerns of the family, and CMS unnecessarily causes much agonizing when it places children of the “wrong color” on waiting lists while it actively recruits children of the “right color” to fill empty magnet school seats.

In sum, the magnet admissions policy is not narrowly tailored. The policy is not necessary to dismantle the de jure system, is for an unlimited duration, provides for virtually no flexibility, and burdens innocent children and their families. The policy quixotically purports to establish equal protection of the laws in the realm of public education by denying children an equal opportunity to compete for open, unclaimed slots in CMS’s extraordinary magnet schools. The withholding of seats from white students after all African-American children wishing seats have been given them is most certainly not a narrowly tailored program. Such a result calls to mind why strict scrutiny is used in the first place: “Of all the criteria by which men and women can be judged, the most pernicious is that of race.” Teaching young children that admission to a specialized academic program with available seats is contingent on their race is indeed pernicious, and CMS’s magnet admissions policy can in no way be described as narrowly tailored to achieve the compelling interest of remedying past discrimination.

### **Nominal damages**

After finding a constitutional violation in the magnet schools, the district court held CMS “nominally liable in the amount of one dollar.” CMS argues that the nominal damages awarded were unjustified because the actions

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resulting in a constitutional violation were taken in good faith. CMS fears that the damages award will “open the door to numerous suits by other students who could claim that they did suffer actual damages and argue that collateral estoppel prevents CMS from denying liability.” Regarding nominal damages, the Supreme Court has observed: “Common-law courts traditionally have vindicated deprivations of certain “absolute” rights that are not shown to have caused actual injury through the award of a nominal sum of money. By making the deprivation of such rights actionable for nominal damages without proof of actual injury, the law recognizes the importance to organized society that those rights be scrupulously observed; but at the same time, it remains true to the principle that substantial damages should be awarded only to compensate actual injury or, in the case of exemplary or punitive damages, to deter or punish malicious deprivations of rights.”

In the present case there was indeed a constitutional violation. CMS ran afoul of the Equal Protection Clause when it adopted a strict racial quota designed to deny an available, unclaimed slot in a specialized magnet school to a child on account of the child’s race. In order to recover nominal damages, Cristina Capacchione need not prove that absent the unconstitutional policy she would have been admitted to the magnet program. The injury in the present case is not the ultimate inability to enroll in the magnet school, but the inability to compete for seats on an equal basis. Though the two open “black seats” at the Olde Providence magnet school were eventually awarded to white children, the fact remains that the official magnet admissions policy prohibited children like Cristina from competing for the open slots. In fact, CMS left the two available “black seats” at Olde Providence unfilled for most of the summer while Cristina and over one hundred other white children lan-

guished on a waiting list. In Orwellian fashion, CMS marketed Olde Providence as “a school to benefit everyone,” but in reality permitted only a select few to compete for the benefits bestowed.

The nominal award in this case recognizes the importance of equal protection under the law and provides some measure of vindication. As for CMS’s worry about collateral estoppel, liability has already been established, and vacating the nominal damages would not change this. Consequently, I would affirm the district court’s award of nominal damages.

### **Injunctive relief**

After recounting the unitary status determination and the constitutional violation in the magnet admissions policy, the district court enjoined “CMS from any further use of race-based lotteries, preferences, and set-asides in student assignment.” CMS challenges the district court’s injunction as unwarranted and overbroad. We review the grant of a permanent injunction for an abuse of discretion.

Before a court grants a permanent injunction, the court must first find necessity – a danger of future violations. The district court’s finding of a threat of future violations centered on CMS’s offering of diversity as a compelling state interest. This interest was offered after the district court decided that the admissions policy should be reviewed using strict scrutiny. Because in this circuit it is unsettled whether diversity may be a compelling state interest, it was improper for the district court to base its injunction on CMS’s unsuccessful defense of the policy. At this point, we can discern nothing in the record indicating that CMS will ignore the district court order and continue to use race in an unconstitutional manner in the operation of the magnet schools or other schools in the system. CMS represented to the district court both during and after trial that it

had no intention of continuing the magnet plan. In moving for a stay of the injunction, CMS did not ask that the injunction be stayed as to the magnet schools, and was prepared to comply immediately with the court’s order. CMS requested a stay as to the non-magnet schools because over 50,000 students were likely to be reassigned in a short period of time. Moreover, there was no evidence presented at trial about what CMS proposed to do as a unitary school system. A post-unitary status student assignment plan was never given to the district court, and the evidence simply does not indicate that “there is an imminent threat of illegal action.”

A finding of unitariness brings a fresh start for the school board – an opportunity to operate a school system in compliance with the Constitution. The prospective relief awarded by the district court is in tension with the resumption of local control, which is one of the ultimate goals of any desegregation order. Freeing the school district from one court order only to shackle it with another was here an abuse of the district court’s discretion, and we therefore vacate the grant of injunctive relief. [Sections on discovery sanctions and attorney’s fees eliminated.]

For the foregoing reasons, a majority of this court affirms the district court’s declaration of unitary status and the imposition of discovery sanctions. We vacate the district court’s injunction because we can discern no danger of future violations. Additionally, I would affirm the finding of a constitutional violation in the magnet schools admissions policy, the award of nominal damages, and the attorney fees awarded pursuant to 42 U.S.C.A. S 1988.

## Opinion of Judge Wilkinson

WILKINSON, Chief Judge, concurring in part:

There can be no doubt that if the 1992 Charlotte-Mecklenburg magnet school program were adopted today, it would be unconstitutional and in violation of our holdings in *Tuttle v. Arlington County Sch. Bd.* (1999), and *Eisenberg v. Montgomery County Pub. Schs.* (1999). Those holdings properly emphasize the ecumenical premise of the Fourteenth Amendment that every American citizen regardless of race or ethnicity is deserving of equal dignity under the law.

The more difficult question is whether the adoption of the magnet school program in 1992, at a time when the school board was under a court desegregation order, stripped the Board of its immunity. I would hold that it did not. Inasmuch as the Board did not forfeit its immunity, I would vacate the award of damages against it and the fees and costs assessed thereon.

Both the Supreme Court's Swann opinion and various lower court opinions relied for many years upon numerical benchmarks as an indicia of progress in achieving school desegregation. That emphasis, however, was primarily the work of the courts, not the school board. And judicial decisions further made clear that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board could take the numerical approach of the courts even further in the course of devising desegregative remedies of its own.

For instance, in Swann, the Supreme Court itself held that: "School authorities are traditionally charged with broad power to formulate and implement educational policy and might well conclude . . . that in order to prepare students to live in a pluralistic society each school should have a prescribed ratio of Negro to white students reflecting the proportion

for the district as a whole. To do this as an educational policy is within the broad discretionary powers of school authorities."

Likewise, in Swann, parents of white students brought suit against the school board because it allegedly had established a set-aside for African-American students to take part in its gifted students program. This court affirmed an injunction prohibiting the plaintiffs from proceeding in state court. We held that the plaintiffs' suit could affect the school board's efforts to comply with prior federal court desegregation orders, including one which required the Board to assign students in such a manner that the schools would have about the same proportion of African-American and white students.

And the district court's desegregation orders in this case can fairly be read to encourage, rather than foreclose, the conduct in which the school board here engaged. For instance, in 1970, Judge McMillan ordered that "the defendants maintain a continuing control over the race of children in each school, . . . and maintain the racial make-up of each school . . . . The defendants are encouraged to use their full 'know-how' and resources to attain the results above described, and thus to achieve the constitutional end by any means at their disposal. The test is not the method or plan, but the results." And four years later, in an order addressing optional schools, which were the precursors of the magnet schools, Judge McMillan ordered that: "Strict and central control must be exercised over all admissions (reassignments) to each optional school in order to fulfill the necessary ends that these schools . . . be integrated by grade at or above approximately a 20% black ratio."

While this case was removed from the active docket in 1975, Judge McMillan noted that: "This case contains many orders of continuing effect, and could be reopened upon proper showing that those orders are not being

observed."

Magnet schools are a widely used desegregation device. It is true that in the early 1990's, the school board in its magnet program eagerly accepted the courts' invitation to rely upon numerical benchmarks. I believe, however, that it is necessary to afford a school board some latitude in attempting to meet its desegregative obligations if we are not to undermine the rule of law. To do otherwise leaves the Board between a rock and a hard place. Namely, if the school board fails to carry out the court desegregation order, it can be cited for contempt or held not to have achieved unitariness. But if the Board acts aggressively to implement the court order, it risks facing judicial condemnation and the threat of litigation on the grounds that it was acting *ultra vires*. This is not the kind of quandary into which we should force institutions that are, for better or worse, under judicial decree. Such an approach risks undermining respect for courts and, indeed, encouraging just the opposite.

My fine colleague, Judge Luttig, insists that the issue here has solely to do with racial quotas. I have strongly disapproved of the use of such quotas. Indeed I believe them to be inimical to a national future founded, as the Fourteenth Amendment requires, upon individual respect and mutual self-regard. Yet to see the sole issue here as racial quotas is to miss the forest for the trees. The cumulative message of innumerable court orders conveyed to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg board over the course of many years was to do everything possible to desegregate Charlotte schools. And the school board attempted to do just that. To now condemn the Board would be to sanction the future disrespect and disregard for court orders of all sorts. This I am unwilling to do.

If an existing court order is infirm, the better course is to modify it through customary court processes. Today, we follow this

approach with our determination that the school district has attained unitary status. This holding puts the school district on a race-neutral footing going forward, thereby granting it a truly fresh start. The solution to the fundamental Fourteenth Amendment problems with the 1992 magnet school plan is not to hold the Board liable for its attempts to implement the very policies, and attain the very ends, which the courts had ordered it to do. The answer is to point to a unitary future in which the principle of non-discrimination will guide its public actions.

### Unitary status

I concur fully in Judge Traxler's view that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system has achieved unitary status. I recognize that some citizens of Charlotte, aware of society's shortcomings on matters of race, may see in unitariness a mocking phrase. Others may view today's embrace of local governance as an act of judicial abandonment. The luminosity of *Brown v. Board of Education* is such that many have come to look at courts as our sole guiding lights. Yet they were never meant to be such. If it was important that courts nurture the task of desegregation in its infancy, it is equally essential that a school district one day depart the comforting judicial homestead and strike out on its own. School districts will be stronger for finding their own way. For in the long run, courts cannot serve as the sole source of hope in the difficult area of desegregation, nor democracy as the object of fear. "Returning schools to the control of local authorities at the earliest practicable date is essential to restore their true accountability in our governmental system. When the school district and all state entities participating with it in operating the schools make decisions in the absence of judicial supervision, they can be held accountable to the citizenry, to the political process, and to the courts



**School districts will be stronger for finding their own way. For in the long run, courts cannot serve as the sole source of hope in the difficult area of desegregation, nor democracy as the object of fear.**

in the ordinary course."

The question then is whether the Charlotte-Mecklenburg system is ready for this step. The district court concluded that it was. It is, I suppose, possible for us to reweigh the evidence or to refract this or that school board decision through a myriad of lenses. While any record, thus dissected, would be found to reveal its share of imperfection, a reversal of the district court's finding of unitariness would do a profound disservice to the people of Charlotte. The recent history of Charlotte, as Judge Traxler's careful opinion demonstrates, is not one of resistance and intransigence. Rather it shows a community struggling to meet its desegregative obligations in a period of staggering demographic change. Most importantly, African Americans are vigorous participants both in the elective and deliberative process with regard to Charlotte's schools.

Of course, the majority's sense of progress may be the dissent's sense of great unfinished business. And let us suppose just for a moment that both are right. Still, I doubt that interminable court proceedings can convey to Americans the sense that we are in the enterprise of education together. For litigation depends for its energy on adversarial

alignments, i.e., the school board and Swann plaintiffs are tentatively aligned, but the Swann plaintiffs and Capacchione plaintiffs are decidedly not. And while democracy has no shortage of conflict, reaching decision and compromise from within the community, as opposed to the external compulsion of court order, promises a better mutual understanding and a firmer common ground.

That at least is the hope. In this sense, then, unitariness is not an act of abandonment but a covenant of faith. It reflects a judicial belief, well supported by this record, that the invidious practices of an indefensible era have indeed been dismantled and that Charlotte has earned the right to begin anew. No decisions are more sensitive and difficult than those involving public schools, and no process is more wrenching than that of matching limited resources to a limitless array of educational needs. But these challenges are better met by communities than by courts and, after thirty-five years of sporadic judicial supervision, the time has come to conclude. If not now, when? Each child is a human being to educate. If this essential task of education has become too daunting for democracy, then I know not who we are or what we shall become.

I am authorized to say that Judge Niemeyer joins in this opinion.

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### Opinion of Judge Widener

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WIDENER, Circuit Judge, concurring and dissenting:

I concur in or dissent from parts of the various opinions of the court and its various members, as indicated below, and I also respectfully dissent to the failure of the court to review the items of the judgment of the district court from which appeal is taken.

We review judgments, not opinions. The judgment of the district court is divided into five parts,

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which are:

1. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools are declared unitary in all respects;

2. All prior injunctive orders or decrees in the Swann case are vacated and dissolved and the case is dismissed with prejudice;

3. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system shall pay nominal damages to the Plaintiff-Intervenors in the amount of \$1;

4. Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools are enjoined from assigning children to schools or to allocate educational opportunities on the basis of race;

5. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system will pay reasonable attorneys fees, expert fees and costs of the Plaintiff-Intervenors.

And the district court, in another order, imposed sanctions on the defendants. I vote to affirm the judgment of the district court in each respect, including the sanctions order, except that I would vacate the judgment of the district court as to Item 4 only on the ground it is unnecessary, the school board having given no indication that it will not comply with the orders of the court in this case.

Despite universally accepted appellate procedure that we review judgments, not opinions, the other members of this court, without mention of the judgment of the district court, have divided a per curiam opinion into four issues, only the last two of which, concerning injunctive relief and sanctions, relate directly to the judgment of the district court we are reviewing. The first two issues, as stated in the per curiam opinion of the court, are phrased by a floating majority.

Only because each of those majorities declines to vote to affirm or reverse the various items of the judgment of the district court, I will attempt to relate my votes to the per curiam opinion.

As to Item 1, I vote that the school system has achieved unitary status. Also as to Item 1, I vote that the attorneys' fees for

work done on the unitary status issue, and any other issue tried in this case, except a few dollars relating to Miss Capacchione's moving, should be granted. The majority, however, while it denies fees on "the unitary status issue," apparently does not immediately mention the fees of Miss Cappacione's attorneys, amounting to the sum of about \$700,000, and one might think from reading the per curiam opinion that they were yet awarded were it not for the next-to-the-last line of the per curiam opinion denying fees "for any reason."

As to Item 2 of the per curiam opinion, I am in agreement with the district court, that the school board should have come back to it for authority to establish magnet schools in which the race of the applicant was considered in deciding whether or not to grant admission. The district court so construed its own orders, which it is best able to do, and to which we must give due deference. I need go no further to affirm the holding of the district court. I am of opinion that Miss Capacchione's Constitutional rights were violated when she was not considered for admission to the magnet school program notwithstanding her race and that she is entitled to nominal damages on that account.

Also as to Item 2, although I feel that the question of immunity has little or nothing to do with this case, because it is being used to rationalize that the successful attorneys do not get their attorneys' fees and that nominal damages for a Constitutional violation are not due, I vote that the school board did not have immunity from the payment of attorneys' fees, nor immunity from nominal damages, that is to say, in the language of the per curiam opinion, it has been forfeited.

As to Items 3 and 4, the per curiam opinion correctly states my votes. [Discussion of attorney fees eliminated.]

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## Opinion of Judge Luttig

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LUTTIG, Circuit Judge, concurring in the judgment in part and dissenting from the judgment in part:

I concur in the opinion of the court that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School System is now unitary, following 35 years of federal court supervision. I also agree with the conclusion reached by Judge Traxler that the School Board acted without the required authorization from the district court both when it created its expansive magnet school program and when it imposed a fixed quota to govern admissions to that program. Neither the creation of the magnet school program nor the imposition of a rigid quota governing admission into that program were authorized by the district court, and both clearly constituted "material changes" from the district court's prior remedial orders, requiring prior court approval. I also agree with Judge Traxler's narrowest conclusion that, absent a proven necessity for such, an admissions program that permanently employs fixed ratios to deny certain students, solely because of their race, the opportunity to compete for seats that will otherwise be left unfilled even after all targeted minorities have been allotted seats (and I assume fixed ratios in a remedial context to be constitutional), is insufficiently tailored to withstand scrutiny.

I address myself separately only to the question whether the district court authorized the strict mathematical quota adopted by the School Board in 1992 to govern admissions to Charlotte-Mecklenburg's magnet school program, a quota that, as noted, required officials literally to leave seats unfilled even after all interested minority students had been afforded an opportunity to attend the magnet school of their choice.

## Magnet admissions

With respect to the magnet school program's admission policy, the holding of the district court that we review is that that court had "firmly rejected the use of rigid racial quotas," and that, in contravention of those orders and the Supreme Court's decision in Swann (1971), the School Board had "us[ed] mathematical ratios not as a starting point but as an ending point." "In policy and in practice, the[magnet schools'] 60/40 ratio requirement [was] an inflexible quota[.]" the district court found, and "slots reserved for one race [would] not be filled by students of another race." Indeed, the court observed, "it was not uncommon for the school year to begin with seats remaining vacant because students of one race would disrupt the desired racial balance." Accordingly, the district court held that the magnet school program constituted a "material departure" from the court's prior remedial orders.

As to whether the rigid quota imposed by the School Board was authorized by the district court, the question is not whether the court's orders authorized race-conscious admission decisions, as the School Board argues, and as Judge Motz and Judge Wilkinson contend by way of strawman. It is indisputable that race-conscious admission decisions were authorized by the district court's orders; not even the plaintiffs argue that they were not. Neither is the question whether parties are required to obey court orders, the only question addressed by the authorities relied upon by Judge Motz; of course, they are. Nor is the question whether quotas were "foreclosed" by the district court's orders, as Judge Wilkinson alternatively maintains; it should be evident that a party does not receive immunity for any and all conduct that is merely unforbidden by judicial order.

And finally, the issue is not whether racial quotas are or are not constitutional. There simply is

no occasion in this case for a general expression of viewpoint as to the use of racial quotas and, although I am given pause over Judge Wilkinson's express and categorical rejection of racial quotas, whatever the circumstance, I certainly express no such general view herein. I might well be presented with circumstances in which I would conclude that racial quotas were essential to the vindication of constitutional right. And I would be most reluctant to foreclose myself from such a conclusion in an appropriate circumstance by statements in a case in which the issue was not even before the court.

Rather, the only issue relevant to the question of whether the School Board is entitled to immunity is whether the district court specifically authorized the School Board's imposition of rigid quotas (i.e., whether the Board was acting pursuant to court order in imposing the fixed quotas), which denied students the opportunity to compete for unfilled seats solely because of their race. If the court did specifically authorize the use of fixed quotas, then the School Board is entitled to immunity; if it did not, then immunity is unavailable. The authorities on this score are uniform. Whether racial quotas are, as a general matter, constitutional has nothing whatsoever to do with the resolution of this issue. If the district court authorized strict racial quotas, then the School Board is entitled to immunity whether or not such strict quotas are constitutional.

Judge Wilkinson misunderstands this issue altogether, as is evident from both his extended and unnecessary discussion of racial quotas in general and his mistaken observation that I "insist" "the issue here has solely to do with racial quotas." Judge Motz, in contrast, understands the issue presented, but errs in its resolution because of a reliance upon fundamentally inapplicable authorities.

Most certainly the district court did not specifically authorize the

School Board to employ fixed quotas in the admission of students to its magnet schools, as the district court itself held. There is not even an argument that it did. Indeed, although fatal to their holding that the board is entitled to immunity, Judges Motz and Wilkinson do not even suggest otherwise. Nor could they.

Not only the very district court in question, but the Supreme Court of the United States itself in this very litigation, both explicitly and consistently disavowed the use and constitutional legitimacy of rigid quotas throughout the thirty-plus year history of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's desegregation efforts. In fact, in the course of this very litigation, even the Charlotte-Mecklenburg School Board has strenuously argued against the fact and the constitutionality of any judicially-imposed quotas by the district court.

## McMillan's rulings

Beginning over thirty-two years ago, in this identical litigation, Judge McMillan himself acknowledged the well-recognized and well-understood distinction between race-conscious decisions and rigid quotas, which is ignored by Judge Motz and variously ignored and misunderstood by Judge Wilkinson today. And he could not have been clearer that he would permit the former in pursuit of integration of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system, but forbid the latter – and he never wavered from that position. Said Judge McMillan at that time, in terms whose import is unmistakable for the issue before us, although "[r]ace may be considered in eliminating segregation in a school system, [f]ixed ratios of pupils will not be set." Judge McMillan's words bear repeating: "Fixed ratios of pupils will not be set." And in emphasis of the distinction he drew between fixed ratios and race-consciousness, he noted that although "efforts should be made to reach a 71-29 ratio in the various schools so that there will be no basis for contend-

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ing that one school is racially different from the others, [it is necessary] to understand that variations from that norm may be unavoidable.”

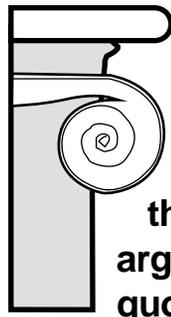
Only two months later, Judge McMillan repeated that his order “[was] not based upon any requirement of ‘racial balance.’” He explained in no uncertain terms that the earlier-referenced 71-29 ratio, which our court today holds specifically authorized imposition of an inflexible quota, was merely a starting point in pursuit of the goal of desegregation.

And a year later, Judge McMillan again explicitly rejected fixed, rigid quotas, re-emphasizing that “‘racial balance’ is not required by this court.” Indeed, the court recited, the previous order “expressly contemplated wide variations in permissible school population.”

**Supreme Court rulings**

Not only did Judge McMillan, in his own orders, repeatedly reject the use of fixed quotas, the Supreme Court of the United States, in reviewing Judge McMillan’s orders, categorically rejected even an urged construction of these orders that would authorize fixed quotas. In reviewing Judge McMillan’s Order of February, 1970, the Supreme Court unambiguously stated, in a passage that should be dispositive of whether the district court previously, and certainly at any time thereafter, specifically (or otherwise) authorized the use of quotas, that it affirmed Judge McMillan’s order only on the condition that it not be read to authorize fixed rigid quotas:

“If we were to read the holding of the District Court to require, as a matter of substantive constitutional right, any particular degree of racial balance or mixing, that approach would be disapproved and we would be obliged to reverse. The constitutional command to desegregate schools does not mean that every school in every community must always reflect the racial composition of



**...the Board that before this court argues that racial quotas were authorized by Judge McMillan, argued before the Supreme Court that it was beyond the constitutional authority of the district court to impose quotas**

the school system as a whole.”

And, in perhaps the most powerful testament of all to the fact that this district court never intended, much less specifically authorized a quota of a type the majority holds today that it did, the School Board itself expressly argued to the Supreme Court of the United States in Swann both that Judge McMillan “disclaim[ed] any intent to require racial balancing,” and that the plain language of the district court order dealing with student enrollment (“about or above 20%”) actually did not set quotas. Indeed, the Board that before this court argues that racial quotas were authorized by Judge McMillan, argued before the Supreme Court that it was beyond the constitutional authority of the district court to impose quotas (“absolutes”), as such would have been based on the district court’s own “subjective” notions of right and wrong, not on the mandates of the Constitution, and would violate individual rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment “of those blacks and whites caught up in the forced mass movement of children away from their neighborhoods.” In an observation that now acquires

ironic overtones of its own in light of the School Board’s current posture that quotas were authorized by the district court, the Board in Swann argued with respect to its position (also rejected by the Supreme Court) that, although not intended by Judge McMillan, his order should nonetheless be construed as effectively requiring racial balancing, that “[i]t is ironic that the counterpart of the compulsion outlawed by Brown I and II is now employed in the name of the Constitution. Is it trite to suggest that two wrongs do not make a right?”

**McMillan’s later orders**

If there were any question as to Judge McMillan’s rejection of fixed quotas, and frankly there can be none in the face of Judge McMillan’s own disavowal and the Supreme Court’s explicit condemnation of such in Swann, it was answered with equal clarity repeatedly by the district court in orders entered in the wake of Swann, in which the court was at obvious and undeniable pains to respect the Supreme Court’s injunction that inflexible quotas not be set.

In an order issued the same month after the Supreme Court’s decision in Swann, Judge McMillan again confirmed that he neither authorized nor permitted strict racial quotas. First, when the School Board asked to close a school to improve racial balance, Judge McMillan rejected the proposal decisively, finding deviations from targeted percentages an insufficient justification for such action. And in language that belies any contention that the court authorized strict quotas, Judge McMillan rejected a flat ban on any student transfers that would alter the targeted composition of a school, instead ordering only that the School Board could not assign a child to a school or allow that child to attend a school different from the one he was attending at the start of the school year, if “the cumulative result of such assignment in any

given period tends substantially to restore or to increase the degree of segregation in either the transfer or the transferee school.”

Two years later, Judge McMillan employed essentially the same carefully crafted language, again distinguishing between “racial identifiability” on one hand and strict quotas on the other, invoking the language of “reasonably stable [pupil distribution],” “substantial [leeway for use of discretion and common sense],” and “[remedy for] gross unfairness [as the ‘legitimate target of a court,’ as contrasted with ‘perfect fairness’ which is ‘impossible to attain’].”

And, finally, in 1974, the district court entered the order that the School Board contends, and Judges Motz and Wilkinson accept, authorized the rigid quotas in dispute. Contrary to the Board’s assertion and my colleagues’ belief, however, that order, too, likewise carefully and deliberately preserved the elementary distinction between flexible ratios as a starting point to bring segregation to an end, which the Supreme Court had held were constitutionally permissible, and strict quotas, which the Supreme Court had held were constitutionally impermissible. Retaining just that amount of flexibility essential to the exercise of what the Supreme Court only two years before had admonished was the limit of its constitutional power, Judge McMillan ordered only “[t]hat the optional school enrollments will be controlled starting with 1974 so that they are open to all county residents and have about or above 20% black students.” Fully aware that the Supreme Court had forbidden imposition of quotas, the School Board itself did not even request authorization to impose strict quotas. Tellingly, the Board only submitted for the district court’s approval a policy requiring that each school maintain a black student population of “at or above approximately 20%.” To anyone

familiar with the history of the litigation, and especially the Supreme Court’s then-recent explicit rejection of any construction of Judge McMillan’s orders that would impose a quota on the School Board, as was the School Board, the purposeful distinction between race consciousness and rigid quota drawn by Judge McMillan in his 1974 order could not be any clearer.

Indeed, foregoing the implausible arguments embraced by the majority, not even the School Board seriously argues before us that the district court authorized strict quotas – which should be unsurprising, given its own argument as early as 1970 that such were unconstitutional and its firsthand knowledge that the Supreme Court had categorically rejected the use of such in this very litigation. To the Board’s credit, it does not even attempt the argument made by Judges Motz and Wilkinson that the language of the district court orders itself authorized quotas. Rather than focus on whether the district court orders imposed or authorized rigid quotas, as to which it says nothing, the Board noticeably and notably passes instead to the very different argument that its admission policies were not, as a practical matter, tantamount to insistence upon rigid quotas as evidenced by the ultimate variation in the racial make-up of the magnet schools. This “[s]ignificant variance,” of course, is not due to the flexibility of the admissions process, but instead to its rigidity to the extent of leaving unfilled seats that were reserved for a particular race, even in the face of a waiting list of students of different races. In any event, the ultimate demographics have no relevance whatever to the threshold question before us of whether the district court did or did not specifically authorize the Board to employ rigid quotas in admissions to its magnet schools – a question as to which the School Board’s silence speaks volumes.

The facts of the repeated explicit

and consistent rejection of quotas by this district court in this very litigation for over thirty years; the categorical rejection by the Supreme Court of the United States of any construction of the district court’s orders that would require rigid quotas; the School Board’s own argument before the Supreme Court in Swann that rigid quotas were never intended or ordered by the district court, and that, if they had been, such would be unconstitutional; and the Board’s tacit (and frankly, candid, if indirect) concession in its briefs before this court that the district court did not authorize rigid quotas, renders beyond any argument the plaintiff’s contention that the School Board acted outside the scope of the district court’s orders when it adopted rigid quotas and refused to permit students to compete for open seats based upon their race alone. Not merely had the district court never authorized the School Board’s use of rigid quotas. It had expressly stated that it would not do so, as the Board itself knew well. And, if this alone were not enough, at this very School Board’s behest, the district court had been instructed by no less an authority than the Supreme Court of the United States that it would have been without the constitutional power to impose such an inflexible requirement on the county officials of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, even had it wanted to. The holding on this record that the district court authorized the use of strict quotas is, as best evidenced by the palpable lack of support summoned by the combined opinions of Judges Motz and Wilkinson on behalf of that holding, simply insupportable.

“The cumulative message of innumerable court orders conveyed to the Charlotte-Mecklenburg board over the course of many years” actually was not, as Judge Wilkinson asserts, “to do everything possible to desegregate Charlotte schools.” It was to do “everything possible” to desegregate Charlotte-

Mecklenburg's schools, except employ strict racial quotas.

## Opinion of Judges Motz and King

DIANA GRIBBON MOTZ &  
ROBERT BRUCE KING, Circuit  
Judges:

A majority of the Court today reverses the district court's finding that the use of a race-based admission policy by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education in its expanded magnet schools program violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Constitution of the United States – and thus vacates the attendant injunction, monetary relief, and attorney's fees award. Every significant aspect of the expanded magnet schools program, including the use of racial proportions in assigning students to magnet schools, was authorized by the judicial desegregation orders governing this case. The Board's obligation to obey these court orders insulates it from constitutional attack for actions taken in compliance with them. It would be the rankest injustice to find the Board liable for a constitutional violation, and subject to monetary damages and enormous attorney's fees, when its expanded magnet schools program was simply a good-faith attempt to comply with the desegregation orders imposed by federal courts to remedy an unlawful dual school system. Thus, for the reasons more fully explained in this opinion, the magnet schools ruling must be reversed and the accompanying injunction, monetary damages, and attorney's fees award must be vacated.

However, a separate majority severely errs in upholding the district court's determination that CMS has achieved unitary status. This majority expresses its "satisfaction that CMS has dismantled the dual school system." For the reasons set forth in this opinion, no one should be satisfied at this time. Nothing yet demonstrates

that CMS has eliminated all vestiges of the unlawful discrimination that has long permeated its school system. In holding to the contrary, the majority has only succeeded here in dashing the hopes of the citizens of Mecklenburg County, particularly those of African-American descent, who have long fought for the fair and equitable implementation of the desegregation plan approved by Judge McMillan some thirty years ago. These successive generations of parents and children have been slowly starved by a well-meaning – but irresolute – governing body, whose sins have been absolved by the court below (and now by a majority of this Court) without anything but the most cursory examination. Although CMS has clearly achieved unitary status in certain respects, there remain several areas of primary concern that have not been subjected to anything approaching a proper constitutional analysis. We deplore, and believe the Court itself may one day regret, the refusal of a present majority to recognize this.

### Historical review

In order to better understand the issues presented in this case, we must briefly review our country's history of school desegregation litigation, in which CMS has played a prominent role.

Even after slavery had been abolished for almost a full century, African-American children were, for the most part, either excluded from the public schools or educated separately from white children. "In fact, any education of Negroes was forbidden by law in some states." Indeed, throughout the early part of the 1900s, CMS operated a segregated school system within the safe harbor created by the Supreme Court's doctrine of "separate but equal" articulated in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896).

In the middle of the 1900s, the Supreme Court began dismantling the great wall of segregation constructed under the imprimatur of

*Plessy*. The Court initially sought to determine whether various "separate" African-American schools were genuinely "equal" to white schools by evaluating the quality of physical facilities, curricula, faculty, and certain "intangible" considerations. In each instance, the Court concluded that they were not.

In 1954, the Supreme Court at last overruled *Plessy*, declaring that "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Just one year later, the Court mandated that federal courts and school authorities take affirmative steps to achieve desegregation. ("*Brown II*"). Specifically, federal courts were to retain jurisdiction over desegregation cases during the period of transition, wielding their equitable powers to supervise school boards' efforts to effectuate integration. One of the most important obligations of the federal courts was to ensure that school boards were proceeding in good faith to desegregate the public schools "with all deliberate speed." With these seminal decisions – *Brown I* and *Brown II* – the Supreme Court promised the citizens of this country, and particularly African-American children, school systems "in which all vestiges of enforced racial segregation have been eliminated."

Notwithstanding the Court's repeated admonition that segregation and its vestiges be eliminated "root and branch," many school boards – CMS included – adopted "an all too familiar" response to the mandate of *Brown II*, interpreting "all deliberate speed" "as giving latitude to delay steps to desegregate." And so, lower federal courts, with the guidance and oversight of the Supreme Court, began fashioning equitable remedies to contend with school board recalcitrance. For example, in *Green*, the Supreme Court held that a "freedom of choice" plan, which permitted students – regardless of race – to choose the school they would attend, was by

itself insufficient to meet the mandate of Brown. In so holding, the Court recognized that more intensive efforts would be necessary in order to make “meaningful and immediate progress toward disestablishing state-imposed segregation.” Subsequently, in this very case, the Court approved significant federal court intervention into a school system in order to eliminate segregation “root and branch,” including the busing of students from schools close to their homes to schools farther away, the use of race-based “mathematical ratios,” and the alteration of student attendance zones.

The Supreme Court has made clear, however, that a federal court’s “end purpose must be to remedy the violation and, in addition, to restore state and local authorities to the control of a school system that is operating in compliance with the Constitution.” Hence, as a school system eliminates the vestiges of past official segregation from certain facets of its operations, courts possess the authority to relinquish supervision in a commensurate fashion. In this context, we examine the steps taken by CMS to eliminate the vestiges of segregation.

### N.C. desegregation

North Carolina’s most significant initial response to the mandate of Brown II was the “Pupil Assignment Act of 1955-56, under which [the Board had] the sole power to assign pupils to schools, and children [were] required to attend the schools to which they [were] assigned.” This was an ineffectual measure – perhaps intentionally so – and by 1964, no more than a few dozen (out of more than 20,000) African-American children in CMS were attending schools with white children.

In 1965, the parents of African-American children attending CMS (hereinafter the “Swann plaintiffs”) filed a class action seeking injunctive relief, claiming that the Board’s policies and practices

were perpetuating a segregated school system. On July 14, 1965, the district court approved a Board-proposed plan that closed certain black schools, built new schools, and established school attendance zones based on neighborhoods. But the linchpin of this plan was its grant of permission to each student – regardless of race – to freely transfer to a different school (often described as a “freedom of choice” plan). In approving this plan, the district court held that CMS had no affirmative duty to “increase the mixing of the races”; instead, the Board’s obligation under Brown II, according to the court, was to act without the intent to perpetuate segregation. The following year, this Court affirmed the district court’s interpretation of Brown II.

However, in the wake of the Supreme Court’s 1968 decision in Green, which struck down a desegregation plan founded predominantly on “freedom of choice,” it became clear that school boards did possess an affirmative obligation to desegregate, not merely an obligation to implement race-neutral policies. Invigorated by the developing law, the Swann plaintiffs promptly filed a motion for further relief with the district court, seeking to expedite the desegregation process.

In 1969, Judge James B. McMillan, newly assigned to the Swann case, re-examined the Board’s actions in light of Green and determined that its “freedom of choice” plan, when coupled with geographic zoning, were “not furthering desegregation.” On the fundamental matters of assigning students and faculty, and the siting of new schools, the court made the following findings:

**Student assignment:** The court noted that a ratio of seventy percent white students to thirty percent black students, which approximated the ratio of white to black students in the county, tended to aid “better students [in holding] their pace, with substantial improvement for the poorer stu-

dents.”

**Faculty assignment:** Although faculty members were not being assigned with a discriminatory purpose, there was also “no sustained effort to desegregate faculties.” The court ordered CMS to work actively to integrate the faculties, so that “a child attending any school in the system will face about the same chances of having a black or a white teacher as he would in any other school.”

**School siting:** The court underscored that the desirability of implementing a “neighborhood school” policy, under which efforts were made to locate schools in neighborhoods and within walking distance for children, could not override the constitutional duty to desegregate. At the same time, CMS was not to avoid locating new facilities in black neighborhoods.

In light of Green, Judge McMillan also ordered CMS to submit a new, amended desegregation plan, and he outlined certain possible remedies, including busing and re-zoning.

Once again, however, CMS was slow to respond, prompting Judge McMillan to impose a deadline of August 4, 1969, by which the Board was to submit a detailed desegregation plan to the court. CMS complied, and its proposed desegregation plan appeared to accept, for the first time, the constitutional duty to desegregate students, teachers, principals, and staffs “at the earliest possible date.” The Board’s proposed desegregation plan, approved by the district court on an interim basis (“interim desegregation plan”), included programs for faculty desegregation, the closing of seven all-black schools, and the reassignment of pupils from the closed schools to outlying, predominantly white schools. In approving the plan on an interim basis, the district court noted that black children were bearing a disproportionate burden of the desegregation efforts, but the court nonetheless concluded that some action – even if interim – was preferable to

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none at all. Judge McMillan also ordered the Board to submit another desegregation plan within three months.

In November and December 1969, the district court determined that the school system's compliance with the interim desegregation plan was unsatisfactory, finding that the Board was continuing to perpetuate segregation:

"The School Board is sharply divided in the expressed views of its members. From the testimony of its members, and from the latest report, it cannot be concluded that a majority of its members have accepted the court's orders as representing the law which applies to the local schools. By the responses to the October 10 questions, the Board has indicated that its members do not accept the duty to desegregate the schools at any ascertainable time; and they have clearly indicated that they intend not to do it effective in the fall of 1970. They have also demonstrated a yawning gap between predictions and performance."

At that time, the district court also reviewed and rejected the Board's newly submitted amended desegregation plan. Then, the court appointed Dr. John A. Finger, Jr. as an expert consultant to prepare a more acceptable plan. This appointment came nearly two years after the Supreme Court's Green decision and more than fifteen years after Brown I.

The district court ultimately adopted Dr. Finger's proposed plan for elementary schools and the Board's plan, as modified by Dr. Finger, for secondary schools (collectively the "Finger Plan"). In doing so, the court again observed the Board's failure to make an effective beginning to desegregation: "The School Board, after four opportunities and nearly ten months of time, have failed to submit a lawful plan (one which desegregates all the schools). This default on their part leaves the court in the position of being forced to prepare or choose a law-



**... the  
(Supreme)  
Court specifically found that  
the district court's  
adoption of a student  
assignment plan  
that used race-based  
"mathematical ratios"  
as a starting point was  
well within the court's  
"equitable remedial discretion."**

ful plan."

The Finger Plan included several components. First, students were to be assigned "in such a way that as nearly as practicable the various schools at various grade levels have about the same proportion of black and white students." Second, "no school [could] be operated with an all-black or predominantly black student body." Third, in redrawing the school system's attendance zones, the Board was authorized to use bus transportation and noncontiguous "satellite zones" to accomplish its goals. (CMS used "satellite zones" in connection with elementary schools. Under this method, students from a small geographic area located outside an elementary school's primary attendance area were assigned to that school. The use of satellite zones was implemented by "pairing" elementary schools – students from a predominantly black neighborhood were bused to a school in a predominantly white neighborhood for grades K-3, and students from a predominantly white neighborhood were bused to a school in a predominantly black neighborhood for grades 4-6.) Fourth, the district court restricted the student transfer policy in order to safeguard against resegregation.

regation. Fifth, the race of faculty members at each school had to approximate the ratio of black and white faculty members throughout the system. Sixth, the overall competence of teachers at formerly black schools could not be inferior to those at formerly white schools. Finally, the district court mandated that the Board monitor and report on its progress in implementing the plan.

The Finger Plan was challenged on several occasions and, in 1971, the Supreme Court upheld it as a valid exercise of the district court's equitable powers. Indeed, the Court specifically found that the district court's adoption of a student assignment plan that used race-based "mathematical ratios" as a starting point was well within the court's "equitable remedial discretion." Even after the Supreme Court's decision in Swann, the district court found that the Board's desegregation efforts failed to meet constitutional requirements. For example, Judge McMillan ordered student assignment proposals revised in June 1971, finding that the proposals "were discriminatory in detail and in overall result; they placed increasing burdens upon black patrons while partially relieving white patrons of similar burdens." During the 1971-72 and 1972-73 school years, the district court attempted a "hands-off" approach, leaving the Board to remedy problems as they arose, but the court twice found that the Board still had not adopted sufficient measures to guard against resegregation and ensure that whites were bearing an appropriate share of the desegregation burden.

The 1974 order expressed somewhat more optimism about the Board's desegregation efforts. In that order, Judge McMillan approved a student assignment proposal that, if implemented properly, would result in "a fair and stable school operation" and would permit the court to close the case as an active matter. The proposal made provisions for sev-

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eral “optional schools” – schools that would offer some specialized program or curriculum and thereby attract students of all races from across Charlotte and Mecklenburg County. Although Judge McMillan approved the incorporation of these schools into the plan, he cautioned that the optional schools would be inconsistent with the school board’s constitutional obligations if they merely served to re-institute “freedom of choice.” (“Freedom of choice’ was a synonym for segregation for many years, and . . . it should not be resurrected at this late date sub nom. ‘optional schools’ without adequate safeguards against discriminatory results.”) To ensure that the optional schools served their stated purpose of furthering the process of desegregation, Judge McMillan decreed that “optional school enrollments will be controlled starting with 1974 so that they . . . have about or above 20% black students.”

Finally, in July 1975, over twenty years after the mandate of Brown II, Judge McMillan for the first time observed, albeit with reservations, that the Board was actually working toward desegregation: “The new Board has taken a more positive attitude toward desegregation and has at last openly supported affirmative action to cope with recurrent racial problems in pupil assignment.” Although the district court cautioned that problems remained, the new vigor with which the Board was pursuing desegregation persuaded Judge McMillan to close Swann as an active matter of litigation and to remove it from the court’s docket. In so acting, the court reaffirmed that its orders still stood: “[t]his case contains many orders of continuing effect, and could be reopened upon proper showing that those orders are not being observed.”

### The Martin case

Between 1975 and 1992, two significant actions were taken in

connection with the CMS desegregation litigation.

First, in 1978, a group of white parents and children brought suit against CMS, seeking an order prohibiting the Board from assigning children pursuant to the Board’s latest student-assignment plan. The Martin plaintiffs claimed that the Supreme Court’s then-recent decisions in Pasadena City Bd. of Educ. v. Spangler (1976), and University of Cal. Regents v. Bakke (1978), prohibited any consideration of race in student assignment. The Swann plaintiffs intervened in Martin, joining the Board’s opposition to the contentions of the Martin plaintiffs.

A brief review of Spangler and Bakke is necessary to an understanding of Martin. In Spangler, the Supreme Court held that because the Pasadena Unified School District (“PUSD”) had achieved racial neutrality in its school attendance pattern, “the District Court was not entitled to require the PUSD to rearrange its attendance zones each year so as to ensure that the racial mix desired by the court was maintained in perpetuity.” All parties in Spangler agreed that the plan initially achieved racial neutrality in student attendance; nonetheless, the district court had believed it was empowered to annually readjust school boundaries to ensure in perpetuity that there would be no majority of any minority race at any Pasadena school. In Bakke, the Supreme Court determined that a public university with no history of discrimination could not constitutionally reserve sixteen out of one hundred admission slots for racial minorities. In striking down this admissions plan, the Court had made clear that “[w]hen a classification denies an individual opportunities or benefits enjoyed by others solely because of his race or ethnic background, [it must] be regarded as [constitutionally] suspect.”

Judge McMillan, who retained jurisdiction over Swann and

presided over Martin, first held that because CMS had not achieved racial neutrality in student attendance, consideration of race in student assignment policies was appropriate under Swann. He explained that because the student assignment policy in the CMS school system had been independently adopted by the Board, it was not established, as the Spangler policy had been, via judicial coercion or order. Second, Judge McMillan ruled that Bakke was inapposite to the claims of the Martin plaintiffs. Specifically, the court reasoned that no child was being denied access to equal educational opportunity because of race, and the actions of the Board were therefore not constitutionally suspect under Bakke.

In upholding the independent actions of the Board, Judge McMillan made several important findings. For example, he found that discrimination had not ended; indeed, it was this very finding that led the court to uphold the 1978 race-conscious student assignment policy. Also, although for the first time the district court praised the efforts of the Board without reservation, it underscored yet again the need for patience and continued efforts:

“It took three centuries to develop a slave culture, to fight a bloody civil war, and to live through the century of racial turmoil after that war.... The culture and attitudes and results of three centuries of segregation cannot be eliminated nor corrected in ten years. Human nature and practices don’t change that fast, even in the hands of people of good will like the members of the present School Board. They need time to work their own experiments, and to find their own ways of producing the sustained operation of a system of schools in which racial discrimination will play no part. I vote to uphold their efforts to date, and to give them that time.”

In 1980, we affirmed the district court’s decision in Martin.

## 1980 modifications

The second significant phase of litigation between 1975 and 1992 was initiated in 1980. At that time, CMS and the Swann plaintiffs notified the district court that the black student population in CMS elementary schools had grown from twenty-nine percent to forty percent, making it increasingly difficult to comply with the desegregation order's mandate to avoid majority-black elementary schools. In response to this change, Judge McMillan approved a modification to the desegregation plan. Instead of prohibiting a "predominantly black student body," the court permitted CMS to operate elementary schools with a black student population of "plus 15 percent" above the district-wide average. Thus, if the school district averaged forty percent black students, any individual school could have fifty-five percent black students.

## Magnets, Capacchione

From 1981 to 1992, the Board continued to operate its desegregation plan as approved by the district court, focusing, *inter alia*, on satellite attendance zones, a feeder plan (assigning middle-school students from a certain neighborhood to identified high schools), school closings, and construction of new schools. Then, in 1992, CMS substantially increased its reliance on "optional" or magnet schools (the "expanded magnet schools program"). The Board placed new emphasis on magnet schools in order to phase out "pairing" and heavy reliance on busing, and to give parents more choice in school selection. It was the expanded magnet schools program that ultimately led to the present phase of this litigation.

In September 1997, William Capacchione, individually and on behalf of his daughter Cristina, sued CMS claiming that Cristina was unconstitutionally denied admission to a magnet school. Christina is Hispanic and

Caucasian, and her suit under 42 U.S.C. S 1983 sought declaratory, injunctive, and compensatory relief. In response, CMS moved to dismiss Capacchione's suit and, almost simultaneously, the Swann plaintiffs moved to reactivate Swann, claiming that CMS was not yet in compliance with past desegregation orders and had not yet achieved unitary status. Because Judge McMillan had died, the cases were assigned to Senior Judge Robert D. Potter, who restored Swann to the district court's docket, consolidated the cases, denied CMS's motion to dismiss, and granted Capacchione's motion to intervene.

The Capacchione plaintiffs claimed that CMS had long since eliminated the vestiges of segregation in its schools, and that its formerly dual system of white and black schools had, for some time, been unitary. They also contended that CMS, while still operating under the court's desegregation orders, had violated those orders and the constitutional rights of white students in its efforts to desegregate the school system by employing a race-conscious assignment lottery in its expanded magnet schools program. The Swann plaintiffs countered that the school system had not yet achieved unitary status. CMS acknowledged that it was not yet in compliance with past desegregation orders and agreed that it should not be declared to have achieved unitary status. CMS also contended that, in any event, the expanded magnet schools program constituted an entirely constitutional and appropriate integration tool authorized under the desegregation orders in this case. The Swann plaintiffs, while endorsing the concept of magnet schools, argued that the expanded magnet schools program, as implemented, was contributing to the resegregation of the school system.

Following a bench trial conducted from April 19 to June 22, 1999, the court, on September 9, 1999, filed its Memorandum of Decision

and Order, from which this appeal is taken. Although the Board claimed that unitary status had not been achieved, the district court found that it had. In its ruling, the district court then found that the Board's expanded magnet schools program, even though instituted to effect court-ordered desegregation, was unconstitutional. Furthermore, the court enjoined the Board from "assigning children to schools or allocating educational opportunities and benefits through race-based lotteries, preferences, set-asides, or other means that deny students an equal footing based on race." Finally, the court awarded the Capacchione plaintiffs nominal monetary damages and substantial attorney's fees.

## Appeals panel ruling

The Board and Swann plaintiffs appealed every portion of the district court's judgment. A panel of this Court, with one judge dissenting, vacated and remanded the district court's unitary status determination, holding that the district court's unitary status findings were insufficient with respect to student assignment, facilities, transportation, and student achievement. The panel also reversed the district court's holding that the expanded magnet schools program violated the Equal Protection Clause, reasoning that the program complied in all respects with court orders governing the case and did not in any way violate the Constitution. Finally, the panel vacated the district court's injunction, the award of nominal damages, and the award of attorney fees. Thereafter, on January 17, 2001, a majority of the active members of the Court voted to hear this case *en banc*.

## Unitary status

We first address the district court's unitary status decision. The determination of whether any part of a school system has achieved unitary status is a factual one; therefore, the district court's findings as to unitary sta-

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tus are reviewed for clear error. No deference, however, is owed to the district court on conclusions of law, including the district court's understanding of controlling law or the various burdens of proof and presumptions; consequently, all such conclusions of law are reviewed de novo.

Indisputably, the school system of Charlotte-Mecklenburg County subjected African-Americans to nearly a century of segregation and discrimination. Indeed, the Supreme Court recognized as much in Swann, noting that North Carolina was one of the states with "a long history of maintaining two sets of schools in a single school system deliberately operated to carry out a governmental policy to separate pupils in schools solely on the basis of race." In this context the remedies forcefully endorsed in Brown II, including the use of race-conscious measures, are necessary to eradicate the invidious segregation at which they are aimed.

Moreover, court supervision over local school boards, also embraced in Brown and its progeny, is entirely appropriate whenever "school authorities fail in their affirmative obligations" "to take whatever steps might be necessary to convert to a unitary system in which racial discrimination would be eliminated." Not only are the federal courts entitled to supervise and direct the actions of local school boards under those circumstances, but the scope of federal authority is almost plenary: "Once a right and a violation have been shown, the scope of a district court's equitable powers to remedy past wrongs is broad, for breadth and flexibility are inherent in equitable remedies." There is no doubt that CMS was justifiably subjected to federal court supervision; in fact, even after the Board had been subjected to court supervision, it had to be repeatedly ordered to begin the process of desegregation.

Ultimately, however, the goal in a desegregation case such as this is to reach the point at which fed-



**The Freeman analysis brings us to the most difficult questions presented in any desegregation case: whether present racial isolation is a vestige of past segregation...**

eral supervision is no longer warranted and the use of race-conscious measures is no longer necessary. The Supreme Court has identified six factors (collectively the "original Green factors") that must be free from racial discrimination before the mandate of Brown is met: (1) student assignment, (2) physical facilities, (3) transportation, (4) faculty, (5) staff, and (6) extracurricular activities. Not only are reviewing courts to ascertain whether these original Green factors are free from racial discrimination, but courts also are entitled, in their discretion, to identify other factors ("ancillary factors") and "determine whether minority students were being disadvantaged in ways that required the formulation of new and further remedies to ensure full compliance with the court's decree."

For school systems proceeding through the difficult process of desegregation, the Supreme Court has adopted the goal of achieving unitary status. Although prior to the Court's Dowell and Freeman decisions federal courts used the term "unitary status" somewhat inconsistently, the term has now come to mean that the school system has been unified such that the vestiges of segregation have been eliminated to the extent practicable. When a school system achieves unitary status, federal courts must withdraw supervision

over the local school board.

In this case, Judge Potter declared that CMS had achieved unitary status in every respect. The Supreme Court has directed that an appellate court review a district court's unitary status determination by applying a two-part inquiry (the "Freeman inquiries"). An appellate court must determine if (1) a school Board has, in good faith, complied with the desegregation decree since it was entered; and (2) the vestiges of de jure segregation in the school system have been eliminated to the extent practicable.

If the party seeking a declaration of unitary status cannot demonstrate that the school system has achieved unitary status in its entirety, we then undertake to determine whether the school system has achieved unitary status with respect to one or some of the Green factors ("partial unitary status"). At that point, we apply, with respect to each Green factor, the two Freeman inquiries along with one additional Freeman-mandated inquiry: "whether retention of judicial control [over one aspect of the school system] is necessary or practicable to achieve compliance with the decree in other facets of the school system." This third Freeman inquiry recognizes that the Green factors are – to a great extent – interrelated, and when determining whether judicial supervision over a school board may be withdrawn, the overlap between the Green factors is a crucial consideration.

The Freeman analysis brings us to the most difficult questions presented in any desegregation case: whether present racial isolation is a vestige of past segregation and, if so, whether a school board can practicably reduce that racial isolation. It is even difficult to define "vestige" in this context. The vestiges "that are the concern of the law may be subtle and intangible but nonetheless they must be so real that they have a causal link to the de jure violation being remedied." We adhere to the most

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common-sense meaning of “vestige”: it is a condition or occurrence causally related to the former de jure system of segregation.

Because a school system’s duty to eliminate such vestiges is restricted by the availability of practicable measures for doing so, it is also incumbent on us to consider practicability. In determining the practicability of further measures, the district court must look to numerous indicia of the system’s operation. Practicability depends on the feasibility of the proposed method, from both a financial and an administrative perspective. Whether a measure is practicable also depends on whether it is “directed to curing the effects of the specific violation,” and whether it is likely to do so.

Our duty, in reviewing Judge Potter’s decision, is clear. We must examine each Green factor and ascertain whether unitary status has been achieved with respect to any or all of them. Because the district court declared the entire CMS school system to have achieved unitary status, we must assess, with respect to each Green factor, whether the Board has complied, in good faith, with the desegregation decree and whether the vestiges of segregation have been eliminated to the extent practicable. If the school system has not achieved unitary status in its entirety, then, consistent with Freeman, we also must weigh the degree of interrelatedness existing between the various Green factors.

By way of introduction to our analysis of this case, we first address a fundamental flaw in the district court’s proceedings – a flaw arising from the district court’s failure to give any consideration to a remedial plan sought to be admitted as evidence by CMS. Following the filing of the Capacchione plaintiffs’ Complaint in Intervention, the Board undertook to produce a comprehensive analysis of whether vestiges of de jure segregation existed in CMS and whether any such vestiges

could be practicably remedied. The Board analyzed available data and identified several vestiges remaining; then, in line with the mandate of Freeman, the Superintendent of CMS developed a plan containing practicable remedial steps. The Board independently reviewed this plan and, on March 30, 1999, adopted the “Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools’ Remedial Plan to Address the Remaining Vestiges of Segregation” (the “Plan” or “Remedial Plan”).

Consistent with pretrial deadlines, CMS filed the Remedial Plan with the district court as a potential exhibit at trial. At the pretrial conference conducted on April 13, 1999, the Capacchione plaintiffs moved in limine to exclude the Remedial Plan. In essence, the Capacchione plaintiffs maintained that the trial had been bifurcated into two phases and that only unitary status was at issue in the first phase. They further maintained that the Remedial Plan contained proposed remedies that could only be implemented if CMS was determined not to have achieved unitary status. Because the unitary status question had not yet been resolved, they claimed that the Remedial Plan (which the Capacchione plaintiffs characterized as a damages report) was irrelevant.

In opposing exclusion of the Remedial Plan, CMS and the Swann plaintiffs relied on the Supreme Court’s Freeman analysis. Specifically, they asserted that each unitary status determination encompassed in the first phase of the trial turned on “whether the vestiges have been remedied to the extent practicable.” The Remedial Plan, they claimed, was not merely relevant, but crucial, to establishing both the existence of vestiges of segregation and the practicability of remedial measures.

Judge Potter responded with two rulings. First, Judge Potter explained in assessing whether CMS had achieved unitary status

that he believed Freeman required him to consider just one thing: “only . . . what CMS has done, not what it may do in the future.” Second, based on this understanding of Freeman and the unitary status test, Judge Potter concluded that the Remedial Plan was irrelevant: “If the Court later determines that additional remedial measures are needed, it may consider the plan. Until that time comes, however, the Court will not get mired in the complex details and mechanics of a proposed plan.”

We believe Judge Potter erred in both of these rulings. First, he misapprehended Freeman and its test for unitary status. At the outset, Freeman explicitly rejects, as a matter of law, the very analysis adopted by the district court. That is, under Freeman, a district court must consider (1) compliance with prior orders (i.e., “what CMS has done”), and (2) whether vestiges have been eliminated to the extent practicable (i.e., “what [CMS] may do in the future”). By construing Freeman’s unitary status test to include the former (“what CMS has done”) but not the latter (“what [CMS] may do in the future”), Judge Potter erred as a matter of law.

The Remedial Plan directly addresses the latter inquiry, and it does so in an apt, informed manner, relying on the considered opinions of highly capable professionals retained to analyze the latest available data. In other words, the district court’s second reason for excluding the Plan – relevancy – also fails to withstand scrutiny. There is no doubt that Judge Potter had wide discretion on this issue, but relevancy is a fluid concept under the Federal Rules of Evidence.

However, we need not rely on the minimal threshold encompassed in the test for relevancy because this Remedial Plan would be relevant under any reasonable test. The Remedial Plan identified record evidence (including the deposition testimony of several experts) supporting the Board’s

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belief that vestiges of de jure segregation in CMS remain apparent in (1) faculty assignment and quality, (2) physical facilities and the allocation of instructional resources, (3) student achievement, and (4) student assignment. More importantly, the Remedial Plan detailed specific steps that the Board proposed to undertake over the course of the ensuing five years “with a goal of achieving unitary status at that time.”

Without a doubt, federal courts possess the final word in deciding whether a particular school system is operating within the parameters of the Constitution. Appreciable weight must be given, however, to the views of those selected by the community to administer the system. In refusing to consider the Plan, the district court erroneously failed to accord the Board’s official position any weight, much less the respect that it was due.

That the district court so completely disregarded this crucial evidence is telling. Nonetheless, ever mindful of the deference accorded the factfinder, we embark upon the task of examining the court’s conclusions.

### **Student assignment**

Of all the Green factors, the most prominent is the degree of racial imbalance in student assignment. Uniformity in the racial composition of a given school was the hallmark of official discrimination, “for under the former de jure regimes racial exclusion was both the means and the end of a policy motivated by disparagement of, or hostility towards, the disfavored race.” Court-ordered desegregation was designed to meet the enemy head-on; the long-term stability of attempts at racial balancing in student assignment is often seen as the most conspicuous indication of the courts’ success (or lack thereof) in combating the underlying societal evil.

The fundamental questions before us are whether present racial isolation in CMS may be a

vestige of the former dual system, and, if so, whether there are practicable measures CMS could take to reduce or eliminate that isolation. In considering these questions, we are bound to focus particularly on the Board’s record of compliance with the district court’s desegregation orders. Because significant and growing racial imbalances in student assignment do exist in CMS, because the Board for decades has failed to comply with certain specific decrees of the district court (particularly regarding the siting of new schools), because these failures may have contributed to current racial isolation, and because future compliance might practically reduce this racial isolation, we would vacate the district court’s finding that CMS has achieved unitary status with respect to student assignment.

In the wake of the 1970 desegregation order, virtually all of the schools in CMS operated in racial balance for a considerable time. By 1998-99, however, nearly thirty percent of the schools in the system had become racially identifiable. Of the 126 schools included in the CMS desegregation plan, twenty-three are identifiably black and thirteen more are identifiably white. Further, virtually all of the identifiably black schools are located in either the inner city or in the immediate northwest-to-northeast suburbs, the areas of Mecklenburg County with the highest concentration of African-Americans. In stark contrast, all thirteen of the identifiably white schools are found in the extreme northern and southern areas of the county, both of which (and particularly the latter) have seen dramatic increases in white population during the past thirty years. The trend in CMS toward resegregation of its schools has accelerated markedly since the move to de-emphasize satellite zones and mandatory busing in 1992. In the last seven years, the number of CMS African-American students who attend racially identifiable schools (now almost three

in ten) has risen fifty percent.

Indisputably, from 1981 until 1997, the CMS school system went through significant demographic changes. For example, the total population of Mecklenburg County has grown from 354,656 in 1970 to 613,310 in 1997. Almost 100,000 children attend CMS, making it the twenty-third largest school system in the country. During the period from 1970 to 1997, the black school-age population (ages 5 through 17) in the county has increased by approximately 10,000. Over the same period, the corresponding white school-age population has decreased by approximately 3,000, and by 1997, African-Americans comprised 34 percent of the county’s school-age population, the total of which numbered approximately 108,600. Evidence before the district court revealed that, since 1970, the growing African-American population has migrated outward from the inner city into formerly white suburbs. In turn, many white citizens who formerly populated the city’s periphery have moved even farther into the county’s outlying reaches. Though parts of the county have become more integrated as the result of these shifts, a disproportionately large number of African-Americans still reside in contiguous clusters generally north and west of the downtown area.

The threshold issue to be addressed is whether the thirty-six racially identifiable schools in CMS represent a vestige of segregation – that is, whether the present racial isolation is causally related to the prior system of de jure segregation. The Swann plaintiffs argue, and CMS agrees, that current racial isolation, like the racial isolation of the 1960s and 1970s, results both from past inequities that, to some extent, have persisted to this day, and from the Board’s failure to comply with certain specific directives in the remedial decrees in this case.

Because CMS has not previously been adjudged to have achieved unitary status in student assign-

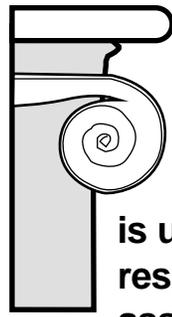
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ment, we are bound under Swann to presume that the current racial imbalance in the school population constitutes a continuing vestige of segregation. The Capacchione plaintiffs have the burden of showing that the present existence of predominantly one-race schools in CMS “is not the result of present or past discriminatory action.”

Our unwillingness to conclude that CMS is unitary with respect to student assignment centers on the Board’s failure to comply with court orders regarding selection of sites for the construction of new schools. The role of school siting in achieving sustainable desegregation should not be underestimated. In fact, the importance of site selection has been apparent since the early stages of this case. As the Supreme Court explained in 1971:

“In the past [site selection] choices . . . have been used as a potent weapon for creating or maintaining a state-segregated school system. . . . [S]chool authorities have sometimes, since Brown, closed schools which appeared likely to become racially mixed through changes in neighborhood residential patterns. This was sometimes accompanied by building new schools in the areas of white suburban expansion farthest from Negro population centers in order to maintain the separation of the races with a minimum departure from the formal principles of “neighborhood zoning.” Such a policy does more than simply influence the short-run composition of the student body of a new school. It may well promote segregated residential patterns which, when combined with ‘neighborhood zoning,’ further lock the school system into the mold of separation of the races.... In ascertaining the existence of legally imposed school segregation, the existence of a pattern of school construction and abandonment is thus a factor of great weight.”

Subsequent to the Supreme Court’s decision in Swann, Judge McMillan specifically ordered that



**Our unwillingness to conclude that CMS is unitary with respect to student assignment centers on the Board’s failure to comply with court orders regarding selection of sites for the construction of new schools.**

site selection for new schools could not “be predicated on population trends alone.” New schools were “to be built where they can readily serve both races.” In the 1979 Martin decision, Judge McMillan devoted an entire section of his opinion to demonstrating that “construction, location and closing of school buildings continue to promote segregation.” (Judge Potter incorrectly declared that “Martin was not a unitary status hearing[.]” In fact, as the accompanying text indicates, the white parents in Martin contended, as the Capacchione plaintiffs do today, that CMS had achieved unitary status. Intervening African-American parents, like those herein, maintained to the contrary. In actuality, there is little difference between today’s case and Martin, and Judge McMillan’s findings in the latter are as binding on the parties as any others made in the course of this litigation. Judge McMillan explained that “[t]he location of schools plays a large if not determinative role in... insuring that any given assignment and feeder plan will provide meaningful desegregation, rather than just the predictably short lived appearance of desegregation.”

In the years since this decree was issued, CMS has built twen-

ty-five of twenty-seven new schools in predominantly white suburban communities. In the mid-1980s, CMS adopted a formal policy of building “midpoint” schools – schools located midway between black and white population centers. There is little evidence, however, to suggest that CMS faithfully adhered to this policy. Rather, record evidence strongly indicates that the policy influenced the site selection for, at most, four of the twenty-seven new schools. Meanwhile, as we discuss infra, there is substantial evidence that CMS has allowed many of its older school facilities in the city – schools attended in disproportionate numbers by African-American students – to fall into a state of disrepair.

The Board’s record of building the great majority of its new schools on the predominantly white suburban fringe of the county supports two possible conclusions. On one hand, CMS could have been responding to demographic reality – a demand for new classrooms in areas of high population growth (although we note that the number of white students in CMS has decreased since 1970, while the black student population has greatly increased). On the other hand, the Board’s pattern of school construction could have facilitated or even hastened white flight to the suburbs. As the Supreme Court explained in Swann, “[p]eople gravitate toward school facilities, just as schools are located in response to the needs of people. The location of schools may thus influence the patterns of residential development of a metropolitan area and have important impact on composition of inner-city neighborhoods.” The Board’s school siting policies could well evidence its lack of political will in the face of pressure to abandon desegregative policies – pressure from families who “are concerned about the racial composition of a prospective school and [who] will make residential decisions accordingly.”

There is certainly no evidence

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that CMS has intentionally sought, through its school siting policies, to “lock the school system into the mold of separation of the races” in the way that the Supreme Court described in Swann. But the actual choices the Board has made with regard to school siting may in fact be quite similar to the “pattern of school construction and abandonment” described by the Court, with the actual effect that the Court feared of “lock[ing] the school system” into a condition of racial isolation. We cannot conclude, at least in the absence of further fact-finding, that CMS, in choosing sites for new schools, has pursued “meaningful desegregation, rather than just the predictably short lived appearance of desegregation.”

Rather, the Board’s practice of siting new schools such that they could not reasonably be expected to serve a racially balanced student population and Judge McMillan’s determination that this practice, in the past, represented the school system’s failure to eliminate the vestiges of segregation, together raise a strong inference that those vestiges remain today. When this inference is viewed in combination with the burden borne by the Capacchione plaintiffs to show that current racial imbalances have no causal link to past discrimination, we are compelled to conclude that a remand to the district court is required.

Although we defer to a district court’s findings of fact unless clearly erroneous, Judge Potter’s error here came in his application of the legal standard to the evidence regarding the Board’s school siting policies. Judge Potter found that (1) CMS had not discriminated on the basis of race in choosing sites for new schools and that (2) CMS had incorporated racial diversity as one of its factors in site selection. Even assuming *arguendo* that both findings are not clearly erroneous, neither is sufficient to support the legal conclusion that in siting new

schools CMS acted in compliance with the governing court orders and Constitution to eliminate the vestiges of segregation to the extent practicable.

“To fulfill this duty, school officials are obligated not only to avoid any official action that has the effect of perpetuating or re-establishing a dual school system, but also to render decisions that further desegregation and help to eliminate the effects of the previous dual school system.” Therefore, CMS had to do more than merely select sites for new schools on a nondiscriminatory basis. It had to do more, too, than simply give some consideration to “diversity” in its selection of sites. To the extent practicable, CMS had to site new schools “where they can readily serve both races.” Judge Potter never found that CMS had met this standard, and as outlined within, there is substantial record evidence that CMS did not do so.

In accordance with Swann, the burden is on the Capacchione plaintiffs to prove that vestiges of past discrimination do not remain, or that nothing can practicably be done to remedy them. We note that Judge McMillan, in his last published decision in this case, clearly evidenced his understanding both that CMS had not done all that it could do in the area of school siting and that future school siting decisions could practicably advance the process of desegregation. It was thus incumbent on the Capacchione plaintiffs to demonstrate that conditions in Charlotte and Mecklenburg County have changed sufficiently such that school siting no longer represents a practicable opportunity to eliminate the vestiges of segregation.

The Swann plaintiffs have identified additional areas in which CMS has fallen short of its obligations under the court orders. For the life of the desegregation orders, CMS has consistently placed the heaviest burden of mandatory busing on African-American students. Currently,

80% of those students who ride the bus as a result of a mandatory assignment are African-American. Judge McMillan repeatedly ordered CMS to distribute this burden more fairly. Yet, CMS has utterly failed to do so. In addition, CMS has never developed an effective system for monitoring student transfers to ensure that the overall effect of such transfers is not to increase the racial imbalance in the system as a whole. Again, this represents a failure to comply with the explicit instructions of the district court. We are troubled by these failings on the part of CMS. They provide additional support for a conclusion that, in the face of political pressure, CMS has not done all that it could do to eliminate the vestiges of segregation.

Finally, the Board has itself taken the remarkable step of admitting its noncompliance with prior orders in this case. A school board’s frank acquiescence in a position inuring to its detriment (in this case, the potential of ongoing judicial intervention), if not treated as conclusive, should at least be considered with the utmost gravity. Under these circumstances, we have no difficulty in determining that the district court’s conclusion that the Board’s level of compliance was “full and satisfactory” should be vacated.

If the vestiges of official discrimination have indeed been eliminated to the extent practicable with respect to student assignment, then there is little reason to prolong court supervision. In light of the district court’s failure, however, to recognize the Board’s continuing noncompliance with respect to student assignment-administered as recently as twenty years ago in a manner reinforcing the once-official notion that African-Americans are inferior, we have no confidence in the court’s ultimate finding that these vestiges have now disappeared.

The district court neglected to determine whether, since Judge McMillan’s decision in Martin, CMS has fulfilled its constitution-

al and court-imposed obligations with regard to site selection for new schools. Had the Board's efforts been deemed lacking, the court below should have proceeded to decide whether this failure contributed to the present condition of racial isolation in the school system. If the district court then found that CMS had failed to live up to its constitutional and judicially decreed obligations, and if that failure did contribute to the present racial imbalances, then the court was bound to further investigate whether proper site selection is a practicable remedy for the lingering effects of the Board's past discriminatory practices. Only if proper site selection were not a viable option could the district court have relinquished control over student assignment; there would be nothing further that CMS could practicably do to eliminate the vestiges of the prior de jure system.

If, however, proper sites were found to be available, then student assignment should have remained under the district court's control. In fashioning a remedy, the court might have directed, for example, that most or all new schools constructed over the next several years be located proximate to the inner city or in midpoint areas already integrated residentially. Conversely, the district court might have concluded that more flexibility is required because of real estate costs, crushing demand in the suburban fringes, or for some other sufficient reason. In this vein, the Board's Remedial Plan could have been considered as a limited term remedy for the racial isolation that would otherwise continue to exist until the Board's newly redirected school siting policies can begin to take effect.

Should corrective action one day be deemed justified in this case, some reasons will not be sufficient to deny African-American students a remedy. For example, political pressure and perceived resistance to change by certain groups in the community will not

suffice. Additionally, logistical barriers merely making "difficult" the transport inward of outlying white students will likewise, if reasonably surmountable, not be enough. Although what is "practicable" need not extend to all that is "possible," rectifying the grievous constitutional wrongs of the past surely justifies reaching beyond the "difficult" or purely "problematic."

### Physical facilities

After describing how CMS has allocated its physical facilities and resources among its students, Judge Potter concluded that "the Swann plaintiffs have failed to overcome the Court's previous findings on facilities by establishing the requisite discriminatory intent and causation." Judge Potter's mention of "previous findings" refers to excerpts from various opinions and orders authored by Judge McMillan:

April 1969: "No racial discrimination or inequality is found in the . . . quality of the school buildings and equipment. . . . Schools described by witnesses as 'white' ranged well up and down on both sides of [the average per-pupil expenditure], and schools described by witnesses as 'black' showed a similar variation."

August 1969: "The defendants contended and the court found in its April 23, 1969 order that facilities and teachers in the various black schools were not measurably inferior to those in the various white schools. It is too late now to expect the court to proceed upon an opposite assumption."

October 1971: "[T]he formerly black schools are not shown nor suggested to be inferior in faculty, plant, equipment or program."

Toward the close of the prior proceedings in 1975 (and consistent with the above), Judge McMillan awarded attorney's fees to the Swann plaintiffs as prevailing parties, "[e]xcept for the refusal of the court to find in the plaintiffs' favor . . . regarding adequacy of physical plants and equipment and teacher quality."

Judge Potter acknowledged that

no court "ha[d] [ ]ever granted unitary status to CMS, nor . . . partially withdrawn supervision as to facilities or any other Green factor." The court nevertheless relied on the above 1969 and 1971 findings to release the Capacchione plaintiffs from their burden of proving CMS unitary with respect to facilities, stating that to proceed otherwise would "defy logic." Judge Potter thus accepted the premise that Judge McMillan's 1969 and 1971 findings "constitute collateral estoppel and law of the case" regarding facilities, "thereby shifting the burden to CMS and the Swann plaintiffs to show discriminatory intent."

The district court's burden-shifting analysis was an error of law. Once the existence of an unlawful dual school system has been established and court supervision begun, it is presumed that racial disparities arising during the period of intervention "are causally related to prior segregation." Following the imposition of judicial control, a party seeking to end the status quo bears the burden of overcoming the presumption of causation. If this burden is met and the school system is declared to have achieved unitary status as to the particular factor at issue, the presumption ends. Generally, in any subsequent proceeding involving new allegations of disparate treatment, the complaining party must show purposeful discrimination.

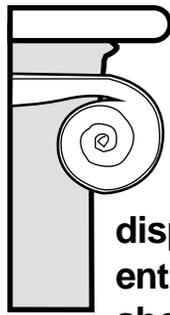
To be sure, the absence heretofore of any finding to the contrary would have been an important consideration in determining whether the Capacchione plaintiffs had proved CMS to have achieved unitary status with respect to facilities. However, that Judge McMillan did not intend his initial observations regarding facilities to be construed as a finding of unitary status is obvious from his subsequent actions. In 1973, Judge McMillan assumed control over facilities and resources, found inequities, and ordered CMS to remedy those dis-

parities. We must conclude that the Board has been subject to the court's jurisdiction as to its facilities since at least 1973.

The asserted lack of a prior adverse finding should not have been determinative of the issue, especially as the district court in 1969 was not focusing on a school system suddenly thrust into the judicial arena, but was instead examining one that had been subject to court supervision for nearly four years. Between the commencement of the initial Swann lawsuit in 1965 and the district court's first mention of the facilities issue in April 1969, CMS closed sixteen black schools. The Board's en masse action gives rise to an almost undeniable inference that these schools were shut down because they were inferior, and the timing also suggests strongly that the closures were prompted by the judicial proceedings then underway.

Viewed in context, the most plausible conclusion is that the putative equality mentioned by the district court in 1969 and 1971 was actually an endorsement of the steps that had been taken by the Board to remedy the inequities in facilities. In any event, CMS could not be said to have achieved unitary status absent a finding by the lower court that the Board had "eliminated the vestiges of its prior discrimination," embodied in an "adjudicat[ion] . . . through the proper judicial procedures."

Thirty-five years have passed since the Board first acted to equalize its facilities, yet serious questions remain as to whether it has finally realized that goal. Dr. Dwayne E. Gardner, an impressively qualified educational planner and consultant, compiled an exhaustive report for the Board in which he evaluated the suitability of its school facilities. Dr. Gardner examined and personally visited more than half of the schools in CMS (including all of the high schools), analyzing a host of factors affecting educational quality. For the purposes of his study, Dr.



**At trial, Dr. Gardner confirmed that the disparities apparent from the above numbers were "substantial" with respect to the facilities generally available to white and African-American children attending CMS.**

Gardner divided the subject schools into three groups: (1) all imbalanced-black schools; (2) all racially balanced schools in imbalanced-black census tracts; and (3) each remaining high school, along with a set of elementary and middle schools randomly selected from the remaining schools and approximately equal in number to those already included within the first two groups.

Each school in the study was assigned a composite score from 0-100, indicating its worthiness. Schools scoring 44 or lower were, in Dr. Gardner's opinion, so deficient as to merit replacement, while those with scores between 45-59 were classified as needing "major improvements." Any school that scored 60 or above was "considered to have the ability to serve the educational program adequately."

The results of Dr. Gardner's study are troubling. The average score for the forty Group 3 schools (racially balanced or imbalanced-white in predominantly white or balanced areas) was 61.7. Although the Group 3 data indicate a situation that is far from ideal, the ten Group 2 schools (racially balanced in predominantly black areas) fared much worse, with an average score of 56.3. The scores of the twenty-three Group 1

schools (imbalanced-black) were worse still, averaging just 53.3.14 At trial, Dr. Gardner confirmed that the disparities apparent from the above numbers were "substantial" with respect to the facilities generally available to white and African-American children attending CMS.

The anecdotal accounts of a number of witnesses effectively corroborated Dr. Gardner's conclusions. John A. Kramer, co-chair of an advisory task force created by the Board, made formal visits to several CMS schools in 1997. Among the locales on Mr. Kramer's itinerary were Elizabeth Lane Elementary, a predominantly white school located in a prosperous suburban area of the county, and Shamrock Gardens Elementary, a downtown school with an African-American student population exceeding sixty percent. Mr. Kramer's descriptions of his visits contrasted sharply:

"[T]o compare Elizabeth Lane Elementary as an example, which is a relatively new school located in Matthews, I walked into that school, I was overwhelmed because I had never set foot in a school that was like that before. It was clean, it was light and airy, it was a beautiful facility.... My overwhelming feeling was, wow, I wish my kids could go to this school. And another observation that was very clear was that when I looked at the student body, it was virtually all white students, obviously affluent, happy kids having a great time.

"On the other hand, my experience, for example, at Shamrock Gardens was shocking by comparison. I had never visited either one of these schools before, but to visit that school which is in the inner city, the students are predominantly black students, it reminded me of a rundown 1950s motel. There was literally no access to the rooms except by outer walkways that were covered by rusted, dilapidated overhead fixtures. . . . They were using closets and things to teach children in. The carpets were stained and

threadbare. . . . It just didn't feel clean, it didn't feel good. And I can honestly say that as a parent, my heartfelt reaction was relief that my children didn't have to go to school there."

Even those Board members who voted to pursue a determination of unitary status before the district court admitted that disparity in facilities was a problem within CMS.

Although it seems reasonably clear that a racial disparity in facilities exists in CMS, its cause is somewhat less apparent. The Capacchione plaintiffs maintain that no discrepancies exist in CMS facilities, and even if they do, such discrepancies are totally benign in origin. Had the Capacchione plaintiffs proved their theory, we would be constrained to affirm the district court's conclusion that unitary status has been achieved with respect to the facilities factor. The district court, however, required the Capacchione plaintiffs to prove nothing; it instead erroneously placed the burden on CMS and the Swann plaintiffs to affirmatively show that the present inequities in facilities are a vestige of official discrimination, i.e., causally related to the prior de jure system of segregation.

The district court erred as a matter of law in foreclosing the development of evidence relevant to a proper vestige analysis. We would therefore remand this portion of the case to permit the parties and the district court to elicit the additional facts necessary to fully consider the question of causation with respect to the current racial inequities in facilities. Because CMS has not been previously adjudged to have attained unitary status, we would charge the Capacchione plaintiffs on remand with the burden of demonstrating that the vestiges of past de jure racial discrimination in the context of the school system's facilities have been eliminated "root and branch" to the extent practicable.

## Transportation

School bus transportation was at the epicenter of the original Swann litigation, specifically the degree to which involuntary busing could be used to implement a remedial desegregation decree. The Supreme Court in Swann, of course, approved busing as a "normal and accepted tool of educational policy," at least to the extent that the rigors of time and distance would pose little risk to the affected students' health or to the educational process as a whole. In the intervening twenty-nine years, CMS has taken the Court's license to heart; during the 1998-99 school year, five of every six students in the school system rode a school bus.

Upon review of the Green factor of transportation, Judge Potter concluded that "a court may grant unitary status when transportation is provided on a non-discriminatory basis." In other words, according to the district court, a school system achieves unitary status with respect to transportation once it provides access to transportation non-discriminatorily to black and white children. Because CMS provides all children, regardless of race, access to transportation, Judge Potter concluded that CMS had achieved unitary status with respect to this Green factor.

We must be mindful of the Supreme Court's command to consider the interrelatedness of the various Green factors. In this context, we can only conclude that the Green factor of transportation is so inextricably intertwined with the Green factors of student assignment and facilities that vacatur on these latter issues would also mandate vacatur on the former.

The Swann plaintiffs maintain and offer substantial record evidence that the burdens of busing for desegregation purposes are being borne disproportionately and unfairly by African-American children. Eighty percent of students who currently ride the bus as a result of a mandatory assign-

ment are African-American. Judge Potter rejected any consideration of this evidence, holding that a school district has achieved unitary status with respect to transportation as soon as it is provided on a race-neutral basis. The evidence, however, demonstrates the close interrelationship of transportation with student assignment. In view of our conclusion that CMS is not yet unitary with regard to student assignment, we think it is premature to relinquish control over transportation at this stage.

## Faculty

Our analysis of this factor must take two concerns into account. We must determine both whether CMS has generally eliminated the vestiges of discrimination in faculty assignment, and whether the teachers assigned to predominantly black schools are of comparable quality to those teaching in schools with large numbers of white students.

The evidence at trial demonstrated that CMS assigned its faculty in substantial compliance with the desegregation order at least until 1992, when school principals were granted the leeway to actively recruit new teachers without the strictures of maintaining a specific racial proportion. As a result of this gravitation from centralized to site-based control of faculty assignments, a trend away from proportionality has emerged. In 1998-99, one-third of the 126 schools covered by the remedial decree had a proportion of black faculty deviating more than ten percent from the system-wide norm (about twenty-one percent). Prior to the 1992 change in policy, no more than one-sixth of the schools had ever been so situated.

We are satisfied that the current trend toward faculty imbalance is neither a vestige of the dual system nor the product of subsequent discrimination. There is no evidence that this trend results from legal or administrative compulsion within CMS or from perceptions about the desirability or

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undesirability of teaching positions in schools that serve students of predominantly one race. In short, we do not perceive a causal relationship between past de jure segregation and the present assignment of faculty members to schools within CMS.

Nor do we think that this trend toward more racially imbalanced faculties has resulted in disparities in the quality of teaching, as measured by the instructors' years of experience and post-graduate work. Indeed, there is no significant difference in experience between faculties at imbalanced-black schools as compared to those that are imbalanced-white. Faculties at black schools are about one year less experienced than the district-wide average, while faculties at white schools are correspondingly more seasoned. This disparity may arouse some initial concerns, until one is informed that the typical CMS teacher has spent more than ten years in the classroom. The upshot is that black and white students alike are, with no meaningful distinction, enjoying the benefits of their teachers' substantial experience.

The difference in post-graduate education between black-school and white-school faculties is more pronounced. For every three teachers holding advanced degrees who ply their craft at imbalanced-white schools, there are only two similarly qualified teachers assigned to schools that are imbalanced-black. Compared to the district average, white schools have a somewhat larger proportion of these highly trained instructors, while the allotment granted to black schools is slightly less than the norm.

Although these facts give us reason for concern, we think it imprudent to disturb the district court's conclusion that the trial evidence affirmatively disclosed no link between past discrimination and the current asymmetry. Most revealing on this point is that, until now, the issue of teacher quality within CMS has

not been contested. The 1970 desegregation order mandating equal competence and experience in faculty assignments was not meant to remedy disparities then existing, but was instead intended to caution against future imbalances. In the intervening thirty years, there is little indication that CMS has neglected to heed the warning inherent in that order. We therefore agree that the district court did not clearly err in concluding that the developing disparities in teacher assignments and any (perhaps superficial) deficiency in the quality of instruction currently afforded African-American children are unrelated to the de jure segregation once prevalent in the school system.

### Staff

In substantially the same manner as it spoke to the allocation of teachers, the final desegregation order provided that "the internal operation of each school, and the assignment and management of school employees, of course be conducted on a non-racial, nondiscriminatory basis." Inasmuch as the Swann plaintiffs raised no challenge to the school system's compliance with the desegregation order in this regard, the court below found CMS to have achieved unitary status with regard to its support staff. We agree that this aspect of the district court's judgment should be affirmed.

### Extracurriculars

According to the evidence at trial, African-American students in CMS participate in athletics and hold class office at a rate proportionate to their numbers. These same students lag far behind, however, when it comes to participating in co-curricular clubs and honors programs. However, the scope of our inquiry concerning extracurricular activities is limited. We need only determine whether the school system permits its students equal access to extracurricular activities, without regard to race.

The criterion of equal access is

surely satisfied in this regard. Participation in honors programs and co-curricular clubs is strictly voluntary, and there is no evidence that the lack of participation by African-American students in certain activities reflects the efforts of CMS to exclude them. We discern no error in the district court's conclusions regarding this Green factor.

Pursuant to the foregoing, we agree that the district court should be affirmed in its determination of unitary status with respect to faculty, staff, extracurricular activities, and student discipline. However, we believe that the court's judgment should be vacated and the case remanded for further consideration in the areas of student assignment, facilities, transportation, and student achievement.

### Magnet programs

We now turn to the question of whether the Board's adoption of the expanded magnet schools program with its race-conscious assignment policy violates the Constitution. We conclude that it does not.

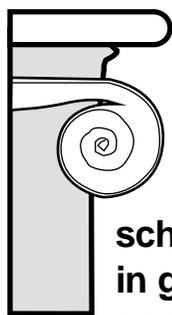
At the outset, we note that it is undisputed that this expanded magnet schools program differs in critical respects from all race-based student assignment plans that have been held to be in conflict with the Equal Protection Clause. Unlike school districts found to have violated the Constitution, CMS adopted the challenged program while operating a dual, segregated school system, under a myriad of court orders commanding the Board to eliminate the unlawful segregation.

The court orders – the public record attests to their numerosity and demands – require CMS to use its expertise and best efforts to desegregate its schools promptly. The federal court repeatedly directed the school board to employ its "full 'know-how' and resources" to use "any means at [its] disposal" to do away with the unconstitutionally segregated school system.

Nor is there any doubt that at the time CMS adopted the expanded magnet schools plan, it was not a unitary school system. This is because even if Judge Potter did not err in decreeing that CMS has now achieved unitary status (and we believe he did), prior to his decision, no court had ever determined that CMS had attained unitary status. As the Capacchione plaintiffs concede, Judge Potter's decision – not some earlier event – “terminated [the] injunction” issued by Judge McMillan and affirmed by the Supreme Court.

Judge Potter properly acknowledged both the governing court orders and the fact that the remedial measures CMS took pursuant to them, including expansion of its magnet schools program, could not be analyzed as if taken by a “de facto” unitary school district. Yet, notwithstanding CMS's undisputed status as a dual school district under multiple court orders to desegregate its schools, the judge held that the Board's adoption of the expanded magnet schools program violated the Equal Protection Clause. Furthermore, he found this constitutional violation rendered CMS liable to the Capacchione plaintiffs for damages and enormous attorney's fees.

The Capacchione plaintiffs seek to uphold that ruling on several grounds. First and principally, they contend that the Board's increased reliance on magnet schools constituted a “voluntary desegregation plan implemented to counteract demographic change,” rather than a good faith effort to eliminate the vestiges of discrimination as required by the court orders governing this case. Second, they argue that the expanded program's race-conscious assignment policy violated the existing desegregation orders. Finally, they maintain that, even if CMS expanded its magnet schools program pursuant to and in compliance with governing court orders, strict scrutiny nonetheless applies and requires



**... the Board expanded its magnet schools program in good faith to comply with these orders, and thus cannot be held to have violated the Constitution.**

that the program be held unconstitutional. The district court properly rejected the first and third arguments, and the dissent does not seek to resurrect them. Accordingly, although we address all of these contentions, we initially examine the second, the only one on which the district court, or the dissent, relies.

In concluding that the expanded magnet schools program violated the Constitution, the district court committed two fatal errors. Initially, it ignored the extent of the protection afforded an entity governed by federal court orders. Then, the district court refused to recognize the broad directives and expansive terms of the controlling court orders, and so failed to appreciate that the Board expanded its magnet schools program in good faith to comply with these orders, and thus cannot be held to have violated the Constitution. The dissent replicates both errors.

Judge Potter, like the dissent, does pay lip service to the “immunity” the Board enjoyed because it was subject to numerous judicial desegregation decrees. But the district court and the dissent apparently do not understand what the numerous court orders in this case required of CMS and the breadth of the protection those orders afforded to it. Thus, both Judge Potter and the dissent mention the subject only in passing, failing even to cite controlling Supreme Court cases on point.

A person or entity subject to a

judicial decree or injunction (as CMS indisputably was when operating its dual, segregated school system) must comply with that decree or injunction, notwithstanding its possible unlawfulness. Thus, the Supreme Court has clearly and unequivocally directed that “persons subject to an injunctive order issued by a court with jurisdiction are expected to obey that decree until it is modified or reversed, even if they have proper grounds to object to the order.”

The only possible exceptions to this “important public policy,” arise if a court lacks jurisdiction over the subject matter of the order or the order has “only a frivolous pretense to validity.” Without question, the federal court had jurisdiction over the subject matter of the desegregation orders issued in this case and no one suggests that those orders constituted “only a frivolous pretense to validity.”

Accordingly, CMS had to obey those orders. This is so notwithstanding that those orders may have required the Board to forego competing obligations, including obligations seemingly required by a federal statute, or the Constitution itself. Indeed, the Supreme Court has explained that to hold that an entity acts “improperly” in obeying a valid court order “would do violence to the common understanding of the term ‘improperly,’” even if the order is later held unlawful or unconstitutional. Moreover, a court order need not mandate specific or precise procedures to compel obedience. Thus, although the Court noted the “breadth and vagueness” of the injunction challenged in Walker, it nonetheless held that the injunction had to be obeyed until “modified or dissolved.”

“Violations of [a court] order are punishable as criminal contempt even though the order is set aside on appeal.” Conversely, when a person or entity acts in good faith to comply with a court order, it should not be punished. Thus, in

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words that resound here, the Supreme Court has explained that “a school board and a school constituency which attempt to comply with a [court-ordered desegregation] plan to the best of their ability should not be penalized.”

Indeed, the Supreme Court has twice expressly held that school boards under court orders to desegregate must comply with those desegregation decrees until absolved of that obligation by a subsequent court order, even if the existing desegregation decrees are improper or unnecessary. In Spangler, the Court concluded that the district court exceeded its remedial discretion when it ordered the Pasadena school district to reconfigure its student attendance zones annually so that there would be “no majority of any minority” in any school. Despite the impropriety of this order, the Court held that the school board had to obey the order until it was properly modified or reversed by a court.

Similarly, in Dowell, the Court refused to interpret an arguably ambiguous court order as having terminated the desegregation decree previously entered against the Oklahoma City school board. Instead, the Court remanded the case to the district court for a determination of “whether the Board made a sufficient showing of constitutional compliance . . . to allow the injunction to be dissolved.” In doing so, the Court explained that judicial orders carry binding authority until they are modified or dissolved.

Moreover, the Dowell Court rejected precisely the kind of argument the Capacchione plaintiffs seek to make here. In Dowell, as here, those challenging the school board’s actions argued (and the court of appeals found) that the school board “unilaterally and contrary to specific provisions” of the controlling court orders “acted in a manner not contemplated by the court in its earlier decrees.” The Supreme Court acknowledged that this might well be so, but concluded that nonetheless it did

“not think that the Board should be penalized for relying on the express language of that order.” Similarly, even if CMS had “acted in a manner not contemplated” in the governing orders – and clearly it did not – it should not “be penalized for relying on the express language” of those orders, i.e., “to use [its] full ‘know-how’ and resources . . . to achieve the constitutional end [i.e., desegregation of the schools] by any means at [its] disposal.”

Of course, the Capacchione plaintiffs could have sought to modify or dissolve the Swann orders as inconsistent with their rights under the Constitution; what they could not do is obtain an injunction, or declaration, that a party compelled to adhere to those orders violated the Constitution in so doing. CMS was obliged to follow the governing desegregation orders and injunctions, and thus the Board “should not be penalized,” for its actions, which were taken to comply with those orders and which the district court found, and the dissent does not dispute, were taken in good faith.

With these principles in mind, we turn to the desegregation orders in this case and the Board’s actions in response to those orders.

Throughout the course of the desegregation efforts in this case, the federal courts – from the district level to the Supreme Court – have told the Board that it has the authority to take “whatever steps might be necessary to convert to a unitary system.” Thus, CMS has continually acted under judicial directives that “[t]he choice of how to do the job of desegregation is for the School Board – not for the court.”

Even beyond CMS’s broad discretion to choose its own methods of eliminating its unconstitutionally segregated schools, Judge McMillan’s orders repeatedly endorsed the Board’s general power and duty to maintain control over the racial composition of the schools in order to eliminate

the vestiges of the segregated system “root and branch.” For instance, in 1970 Judge McMillan mandated: “That the defendants maintain a continuing control over the race of children in each school . . . and maintain the racial make-up of each school (including any new and any reopened schools) to prevent any school from becoming racially identifiable. . . . The duty imposed by the law and by this order is the desegregation of schools and the maintenance of that condition. . . . The defendants are encouraged to use their full ‘know-how’ and resources to attain the results above described, and thus to achieve the constitutional end by any means at their disposal. The test is not the method or plan, but the results.”

Moreover, Chief Justice Burger’s opinion for the Supreme Court in Swann provides explicit sanction of the Board’s use of racial “ratios” or proportions in assigning students to schools:

“School authorities are traditionally charged with broad power to formulate and implement education policy and might well conclude, for example, that in order to prepare students to live in a pluralistic society each school should have a prescribed ratio of Negro to white students reflecting the proportion for the district as a whole. To do this as an educational policy is within the broad discretionary powers of school authorities; absent a finding of a constitutional violation, however, that would not be within the authority of a federal court.”

Not only was CMS empowered to use ratios in student assignments generally, it was also specifically authorized to use race-conscious assignment policies for “appropriately integrated optional schools.” Judge McMillan approved the Board’s policy, which provided:

“Strict and central control must be exercised over all admissions (reassignments) to each optional school in order to fulfill the necessary ends that these schools be

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open to all county residents and be integrated by grade at or above approximately a 20% black ratio. Reassignments to optional schools must not jeopardize the racial composition of any other school.

“Guidelines and central monitoring by the Pupil Assignment staff with the respective school principals are to be drawn up. Capacities and allocation of maximum numbers of students that may be drawn from each other school attendance area, by race, are to be designated. The actual enrollment of the optional school may have to be guided by its racial composition and by the number drawn from each other school area, not by considerations of space and program only.”

In response to these directives, in the 1970s CMS established some magnet schools, which it called “optional schools.” These schools offered two special curricula – “open” and “traditional” – both of which constituted “very rigorous academic program[s]” not offered in “conventional schools.” In 1992, the Board expanded its magnet schools program into a district-wide system with a wider range of curricular choices. In the expanded magnet schools program, the Board retained the curricula first available in the early magnet or “optional” schools - the “open” curriculum emphasizing “interdisciplinary approaches,” and the “traditional” curriculum featuring a “highly structured program.” Furthermore, six of the early magnet schools that offered such curricula prior to 1992 - Myers Park, Elizabeth, Hawthorne, Irwin Avenue, Piedmont, and West Charlotte - continue to do so today under the expanded magnet schools program.

The expanded magnet schools program is a typical and appropriate desegregation tool “conceived and developed in large, urban school districts seeking a voluntary alternative to busing as a means of decreasing racial segregation.” Even the dissenters recognize that “a magnet schools pro-

gram, properly implemented, can no doubt be an effective desegregation tool.” But they nonetheless suggest that the expanded magnet schools program, in and of itself, may violate the Constitution. This suggestion is surprising, given that the federal courts have consistently approved magnet school plans as desegregation tools. The dissent’s suggestion that CMS somehow violated the Constitution by expanding its magnet schools program and “abandon[ing] pairings, satellites, and feeders,” seems particularly extraordinary. Magnet schools are generally regarded as being a less onerous and more successful desegregation tool than pairing, satellites, or feeders because magnet schools provide more opportunity for student choice.

Of course, as Judge McMillan warned, in approving the early magnet or optional schools, assignment of pupils to such schools must be undertaken in a manner that “provide[s] . . . access to appropriately integrated optional schools,” and “prevent[s] significant jeopardy to the racial composition of other schools.”

For this reason, race is, and must be, considered in assigning students to the magnet schools instituted under CMS’s expanded program, just as it was in assigning students to the original magnet or optional schools. Specifically, under the expanded program, CMS allocates 40% of the seats in its magnet schools for black students and 60% for students of other races. This ratio reflects the student population of the school system, which is approximately 41.0% black, 52.2% white, 3.7% Asian, 2.5% Hispanic, and .5% American Indian. CMS generally assigns students to its magnet schools using two parallel lotteries, one for black students and one for white students. When there has been insufficient interest from black students to fill the seats allocated to them in a particular school, CMS has sometimes refused to allow students of other races to fill those slots.

Thus, race may affect a student’s chances of being assigned to a magnet school.

It is this portion of the expanded magnet schools program that Judge Potter regarded as unconstitutional, reasoning that Judge McMillan “firmly rejected the use of rigid racial quotas.” In reaching this conclusion, Judge Potter misread the order on which he assertedly relied and ignored the multiple other orders and injunctions governing this case.

Actually, in the very paragraph on which Judge Potter relied, in which Judge McMillan held that “[f]ixed ratios of pupils in particular schools will not be set” by the court, Judge McMillan also held that “efforts should be made [by the school board] to reach a 71-29 ratio in the various schools so that there will be no basis for contending that one school is racially different from the others.” Judge Potter transmuted this statement - an authorization for the Board to make “efforts” to “reach a 71-29 ratio” - into a prohibition against the Board assigning students to schools on the basis of that fixed ratio. We cannot accept this reading of Judge McMillan’s order. Taken as a whole, this paragraph provides some of the clearest evidence that Judge McMillan not only authorized the Board to use fixed ratios in assigning students to schools but encouraged it to do so. Recognizing the impracticability of adopting a court-ordered, system-wide racial balance to which all schools must adhere, Judge McMillan did observe that “variations from that [71-29 ratio] may be unavoidable.” But that statement imposes no limitations on the scope of permissible Board action. Rather, it suggests that “variations” were acceptable only because they were “unavoidable.”

The Board could not have accomplished what the desegregation orders required without “using race” in the way that it “used race” in the context of the expanded magnet schools program. In the 1970 order, affirmed by the Supreme Court, Judge

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McMillan decreed “[t]hat pupils of all grades be assigned in such a way that as nearly as practicable the various schools at various grade levels have about the same proportion of black and white students.” We cannot fathom how the Board could set out to achieve “about the same proportion of black and white students” in each grade level in each of its over one hundred schools without employing fixed racial ratios as the central components of its student assignment plan. Neither, apparently, could Judge McMillan.

To achieve “about the same proportion,” the Board necessarily had to set fixed upper and lower limits on the proportion of white and black students it would permit in each grade in each school. Only with these fixed racial proportions as its lodestars could the Board assign students to schools, and approve or deny individual requests to transfer. The Board could never have justified a denial of a transfer request without having a fixed conception of exactly how few white or black students in a particular school would be too few.

Indeed, Judge McMillan expressly approved many aspects of the CMS desegregation plan that were explicitly based on strict racial ratios. For example, the Board’s majority-to-minority transfer policy, which was specifically authorized by the governing desegregation orders, takes race into account in much the same way as the magnet schools assignment policy. Under the transfer policy, a student in the racial majority in his current school could freely transfer to a school in which he would be in the racial minority. A white student in a majority white school, for example, could freely transfer to a majority black school, but that same student could be denied admission to a majority white school, solely on the basis of a rigid 50% racial ceiling. Meanwhile, a black student at a majority black school could freely transfer into the same majority

white school to which the white student might be denied admission. The Supreme Court approved this use of majority-to-minority transfer policies as “a useful part of every desegregation plan” and “an indispensable remedy.” In fact, Judge McMillan specifically upheld this majority-to-minority plan, despite former CMS Superintendent Dr. J. M. Robinson’s complaints about the rigidity of the 50% limit.

It is certainly true that Judge McMillan’s orders and the Supreme Court’s opinion in Swann consistently signaled concern with the imposition of racial proportions or ratios by federal courts. That concern, however, is rooted in the problem of federal courts exceeding their remedial discretion, not in any objection to the use of racial proportions or ratios by school boards themselves in their desegregation plans. Thus, the Supreme Court noted that, “[t]he constitutional command to desegregate schools does not mean that every school in every community must always reflect the racial composition of the school system as a whole,” but went on to conclude that “the very limited use made of mathematical ratios was within the equitable remedial discretion of the District Court.”

That this concern with ratios is rooted in the limits of judicial power to order remedial action, not in the impropriety of using racial proportions to remedy the vestiges of segregation, is nowhere more apparent than in Chief Justice Burger’s statement in Swann. There, the Chief Justice noted that while in certain circumstances it might be inappropriate for a federal court to require adherence to “a prescribed ratio of Negro to white students reflecting” the population of the “district as a whole,” it would be “within the broad discretionary powers of school authorities” to do so.

Indeed, in Swann’s companion case, North Carolina State Bd. of Educ. v. Swann, (1971), the

Supreme Court held that any attempt to “inhibit or obstruct” the Board’s use of racial ratios “must fall.” The Court explained that, “when past and continuing constitutional violations are found [as they had been in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system], some ratios are likely to be useful starting points in shaping a remedy. An absolute prohibition against use of such a device . . . contravenes the implicit command of Green.” The Court expressly recognized that a “flat prohibition against assignment of students for the purpose of creating racial balance must inevitably conflict with the duty of school authorities to disestablish dual school systems.”

The Board’s authority to employ racial ratios is explicit not only in the Supreme Court’s opinions, but also in Judge McMillan’s repeated statements to the effect that “[i]ndependent of any court order . . . if this Board of Education chose to run an integrated school system on the basis of preconceived ratios, it has that constitutional right.” In fact, early in the litigation Judge McMillan held that:

“Counsel for the plaintiffs says that since the ratio of white to black students is about 70/30, the School Board should assign the children on a basis 70% white and 30% black, and bus them to all the schools. This court does not feel that it has the power to make such a specific order.

Nevertheless, the Board does have the power to establish a formula and provide transportation.”

Moreover, this Court upheld “the validity of the Board’s decision to reassign students in order to maintain racial ratios,” and stated that the “School Board is vested with broad discretionary powers over educational policy and is well within its powers when it decides that as a matter of policy schools should not have a majority [over 50%] of minority students.” Having been repeatedly told by federal courts that it had the “constitutional right” to “maintain racial ratios” to remedy past segregation, CMS cannot

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now be held to have violated the Constitution for doing exactly what the courts have said it had the power to do.

In short, time and again, the federal courts at all levels have authorized the Board to employ racial ratios to remedy its unlawfully segregated school system. Although the dissent repeatedly contends to the contrary, no court has ever prohibited CMS (rather than the federal court supervising it) from imposing “racial ratios.” The dissent’s contention that Judge McMillan’s order – mandating a black student population “about or above 20%” in the optional schools, instead of the Board’s proposed “at or above approximately 20%” language – constitutes a rejection of “rigid racial quotas,” is singularly unconvincing. It seems unlikely that by this slight word difference Judge McMillan even indicated a disapproval of the Board’s use of “rigid” quotas, which would otherwise have been permitted under the Board’s policy. It seems far more likely that Judge McMillan believed that his order permitting a racial ratio “about or above 20%” was equivalent to the Board’s policy of permitting a racial ratio “at or above approximately 20%.” In any event, neither linguistic formulation prohibits the Board from adopting an 80-20 ratio for the early optional schools, or the 60-40 ratio for magnet schools that it subsequently adopted in 1992, especially in light of the Board’s broad discretion and explicit authorization to use strict racial ratios in other areas of its desegregation plan.

Similarly, the dissent’s suggestion that the expanded magnet schools program differs from the “optional schools” program because the Board set “inflexible quotas” in the expanded plan, is simply not borne out by the record. In truth, in 1992, CMS implemented a 60-40 white-black ratio with an eye to reaching a racial balance that corresponded with the make-up of the entire



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student population of the school system, just as in 1974 it implemented the 80-20 white-black ratio to correspond with the entire student population at that time. The 60-40 ratio was not applied in any more of a rigid or “inflexible” manner than the earlier ratio; Board policy provided that “all magnet schools would maintain a 60-40 white-black ratio plus or minus 15%,” and the Student Assignment Plan permitted “racial balance [to] be allowed to fluctuate.” The Board’s Executive Director of Planning and Student Placement testified that several race-neutral considerations, such as sibling attendance, would allow a school to “depart from the 60-40 goal.” Contrary to the dissent’s claims of rigidity, not a single magnet school actually manifested a 60-40 ratio. A number of magnet schools came close to the stated goal, but the percentage of black students in CMS’s magnet schools ranged from 7% to 82%, and students that failed to gain admission to one magnet school “often ha[d] a seat waiting for them at another magnet school of their choosing.” In fact, the two “black seats” about which Christina Capacchione originally complained were ultimately filled by two white students, despite the

supposedly “inflexible” ratio. In sum, the 60-40 ratio was not an unbendable “quota,” either in policy or in practice, any more than the earlier ratio had been.

Both the Supreme Court and Judge McMillan provided CMS with “wide discretion” to fashion appropriate remedies in light of the particular needs of its pupils and the school system’s experience with other desegregation tools. Additionally, Judge McMillan approved specific race-conscious assignment measures generally and specifically as to magnet schools. Thus, when adopting a 60-40 assignment formula in the expanded magnet schools program, the Board not only acted within its “wide discretion,” but also in accordance with specific procedures approved by the district court.

Judge Potter’s conclusion (and the dissent’s contention) to the contrary simply cannot be reconciled with the Supreme Court opinion in Swann, our opinions in this case, and Judge McMillan’s decrees. The magnet schools’ race-conscious assignment policy constitutes a necessary safeguard against the risk that unchecked transfers to magnet schools could increase the number of racially identifiable schools in violation of the Board’s continuing obligation under the desegregation orders. In that vein, the Capacchione plaintiffs’ own expert on school desegregation, Dr. David Armor, agreed that racial quotas are permissible in a desegregation plan. Dr. Armor testified that “race is an integral part of pairing, of satelliting, of magnet schools, of running lotteries for magnet schools. The entire plan is predicated on race and race controls, because that’s the only way you can meet the court order and to have an effective plan is to employ race requirements and racial quotas basically for all schools.”

In sum, contrary to Judge Potter’s conclusion, Judge McMillan specifically authorized the use of fixed ratios based on race in assigning students to mag-

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net schools. Furthermore, even without such specific authorization, the broad discretion granted the Board by the Supreme Court's opinion in Swann and by the other court orders and injunctions governing this case permitted CMS to fashion magnet schools with racially balanced enrollments. The decrees make plain that ratios based on race were among the "means" by which the Board was authorized "to achieve the constitutional end" of desegregation. As such, the Board did not violate the Equal Protection Clause in adopting such ratios in its expanded magnet schools program.

### Demographics

As their principal contention, the Capacchione plaintiffs argue that the expanded magnet schools program was a response to demographic change rather than a true attempt to remedy past discrimination. We cannot agree.

First, Judge Potter "accept[ed] that the school system was acting to . . . remedy [ ] the effects of past racial discrimination" in expanding the number of magnet schools in 1992. Ample record evidence supports this finding.

Furthermore, the dichotomy the Capacchione plaintiffs suggest between "counter[ing] demographic change," on the one hand, and remedying past discrimination, on the other, oversimplifies both the law of school desegregation, particularly the Supreme Court's decisions in Green, Swann, and Freeman, and the practical reality of achieving desegregation in a large urban school district. From the early stages of the Swann litigation, all concerned have understood that demographic patterns would complicate the process of school desegregation. Indeed, remedies such as school busing and satellite attendance zones would never have been necessary in the first place if the demography of the community were not an obstacle to desegregation. In a sense, Swann's basic teaching is that the Constitution sometimes requires schools to "counter demo-

graph[y]" in order to achieve desegregation. The Swann Court noted that the process of "local authorities . . . meet[ing] their constitutional obligations" had "been rendered more difficult by changes . . . in the structure and patterns of communities, the growth of student population, [and] movement of families." The Court expressed concern that "segregated residential patterns . . . [would] lock the school system into the mold of separation of the races." Thus, CMS simply followed the Supreme Court's guidance in Swann in regarding change as a problem inhibiting its progress toward unitary status.

Moreover, Freeman simply did not hold, as the Capacchione plaintiffs necessarily imply, that demographic changes in a metropolitan area independently eliminate the vestiges of past discrimination. Nor does Freeman bar courts from targeting racial isolation resulting in significant part from "private choice," if that isolation is also a vestige of past discrimination. The effect of such a holding in Freeman would have been to overrule Green, which the Supreme Court did not purport to do. In Green, even though the school board allowed every student "freedom of choice" as to which school to attend, the formerly black school remained all black and the formerly white school remained predominantly white – wholly as a result, in some sense, of this "private choice." The Green Court held that, although the private choices of students and their families were responsible for the continuing racial isolation of the schools' student populations, that fact did not preclude a finding that the racial isolation was also a vestige of past discrimination. Indeed, the Court held not only that it was permissible for the school board to take further action to desegregate, but that the board was required to take further action in order to fulfill its "affirmative duty" to desegregate.

Although Freeman recognized

that, at a certain point in the process of desegregation, a court may determine that present racial isolation cannot be considered a by-product of the past regime of segregation, the case does not require – or even empower – a school board under a judicial desegregation order to make that determination on its own. Rather, so long as CMS was under court order to desegregate, it was required to treat racial isolation in its schools as a vestige of segregation, and to take appropriate action to eliminate that vestige.

### Constitutional issue

Finally, the Capacchione plaintiffs maintain that, even if CMS administered the expanded magnet schools program pursuant to and in conformity with the governing desegregation decrees, CMS violated the Constitution in doing so. Judge Potter rejected this argument, as do we (and the dissent, in never mentioning it, apparently also rejects it). The Capacchione plaintiffs rely on inapposite case law in attempting to establish that Board actions taken pursuant to court-ordered desegregation decrees can be held unconstitutional.

Specifically, they rely on recent decisions finding voluntary, race-conscious magnet school programs (not developed under a governing desegregation order) unconstitutional. In fact, the courts emphasized in those cases that the school system had not been under a court order to desegregate, and had adopted a magnet program "not to remedy past discrimination, but rather to promote racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity." Indeed, in Eisenberg we endorsed the permissibility of race-based classifications "in situations," like that at hand, "where past constitutional violations require race-based remedial action."

The distinction between a unitary school system and a school system under court order to desegregate is, from a legal standpoint, fundamental. Furthermore, as discussed supra, it is the judi-

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cial finding of unitary status, not any particular action by the school board or condition in the school system, upon which the distinction turns. Of course, for a formerly segregated school system, the attainment of unitary status reflects years or decades of gradual change, not an overnight shift in policy or outlook. Although CMS will not look much different the day it becomes unitary than it will have looked the previous day, attainment of unitary status triggers significant legal consequences. In a non-unitary school system, all one-race or predominantly one-race schools are presumed to be vestiges of segregation, and the burden is on the challenging party to show that those schools are nondiscriminatory. Once a court has declared a school system unitary, on the other hand, the presumption is that the vestiges of segregation have been eliminated, and a plaintiff seeking to demonstrate a constitutional violation on the basis of the existence of one-race or predominantly one-race schools must “prove discriminatory intent on the part of the school board.”

As Judge Potter recognized, CMS implemented and administered its expanded magnet schools program prior to ever achieving unitary status and while still under court order to remedy the vestiges of segregation. Therefore, recent decisions, like Eisenberg and Tuttle, addressing the constitutionality of magnet school assignment policies in unitary school systems not under court order, are simply inapposite.

Moreover, even if Tuttle and Eisenberg generally applied to governmental acts performed pursuant to remedial desegregation orders (which they do not), the Board’s expanded magnet schools program would withstand constitutional scrutiny. This is so because if a precedent of the Supreme Court “has direct application in a case,” inferior courts must follow that precedent “even if later cases appear to call it into question, leaving to [the Supreme]

Court the prerogative of overruling its own decisions.”

There could hardly be a clearer case for application of this principle. Here, the Supreme Court’s Swann decision itself constitutes directly controlling precedent. In Swann, the Court concluded that CMS could be constitutionally required to make efforts “to reach a 71-29 ratio” in the schools under its authority, and to assign students “in such a way that as nearly as practicable the various schools at various grade levels have about the same proportion of black and white students.” Indeed, the Supreme Court again noted in Freeman that its decision in Swann specifically approved racial balancing by CMS to achieve the remedial end of eliminating the vestiges of segregation. Under the principle articulated in Agostini, only the Supreme Court itself can modify the decrees in this case to prohibit what Swann so clearly permitted.

### Injunction

The Supreme Court’s decision in Swann is the law of the case; it must be followed. But more than just the law of this case, for almost thirty years Swann also has functioned as a blueprint for school desegregation in school districts throughout this Nation. As long as Swann is controlling law, and as long as the Board acts pursuant to the Swann desegregation orders – as it did in implementing the expanded magnet schools program – it cannot be held to have violated the Constitution.

Judge Potter also enjoined CMS from “assigning children to schools or allocating educational opportunities and benefits through race-based lotteries, preferences, set-asides, or other means that deny students an equal footing based on race.” In considering the propriety of an injunction, we review factual findings only for clear error, but the “district court’s application of legal principles . . . presents a legal question reviewed de novo.”

Given the Court’s holding today that CMS did not violate the con-

stitutional rights of the Capacchione plaintiffs by consideration of race in its expanded magnet schools program, and because we would also hold that CMS has not yet achieved unitary status, there is, in our view, no legal basis for the district court’s injunction. Moreover, even if the district court properly determined that CMS had attained unitary status, the injunction still must be vacated. This is so because the district court could issue an injunction only to the extent that it concluded that CMS was likely to persist in current practices that would violate the Constitution if undertaken outside of the remedial context. Judge Potter made no such finding.

Indeed, the only CMS action that Judge Potter held to violate the Constitution was the expanded magnet schools program (a holding that this Court has now reversed); the judge did not consider the constitutionality of any other method of student assignment or resource allocation. Yet the injunction by its terms prohibits any consideration of race by CMS in student assignment or allocation of educational benefits that “den[ies] students an equal footing.” The injunction thus goes much further than simply prohibiting CMS from reinstating the expanded magnet schools program and its race-conscious assignment policy.

This court has repeatedly held similar injunctions too broad, explaining that “[a]lthough injunctive relief should be designed to grant the relief needed to remedy the injury to the prevailing party, it should not go beyond the extent of the established violation.” Similarly, the Supreme Court has directed “[f]ederal court decrees must directly address and relate to the constitutional violation itself.” Because the injunction issued in this case did not do this, it must be vacated. [Sections on attorney fees and discovery eliminated.]

## Conclusion

We must and do sympathize with those who are impatient with continued federal court involvement in the operation of local schools. One might consider thirty-five years a long time for a school district to operate under judicial desegregation decrees. However, when the Supreme Court decided *Swann* in 1971 no one could reasonably have thought that the substantial task described there would be quickly or easily accomplished. CMS, which maintained a separate, decidedly unequal dual educational system for decades – and which mightily resisted desegregation of any sort for years after it became the law of the land – has come a long way. Although CMS has now achieved unitary status in certain respects, the record in this case simply does not support a determination that the process of desegregation is at an end.

For more than a hundred years, in fits and starts, our nation has attempted to undo the effects of its shameful heritage of slavery. For nearly fifty years, federal courts have struggled with the task of dismantling legally enforced racial segregation in many of our schools. This task has given rise to one of the preeminent issues of constitutional law in our time. We do not yet know how history will regard the courts' role in adjudicating and presiding over the desegregation of schools. It may be seen as a brief and unfortunate jurisprudential anomaly, justified only by the immediacy of the evil it was intended to uproot, or it may be recognized as the necessarily sustained effort to eradicate deep-seated vestiges of racial discrimination and to vindicate the promise of the Fourteenth Amendment, or it may be viewed in some other way that we cannot now anticipate.

But we are certain that the end of this great task must be accomplished in an orderly manner, consistent with and true to its origin. We are certain, too, that if the courts, at some point, come to

view the effort to eliminate the vestiges of segregation as having been overly "race-conscious," they must do so with a clear assessment of the historical record.

Race neutrality, of course, represents one of our constitutional ideals. Properly understood, it is an ideal not at all in tension with our obligation as a society to undo the effects of slavery and of the racial caste system that was perpetuated, for more than a century, in slavery's wake. But we must be ever mindful, as we strive for race neutrality, that a reductive and willfully ahistorical conception of race neutrality was, in an earlier era, used as a blunt instrument against the aspirations of African-Americans merely seeking to claim entitlement to full citizenship.

In striking down early civil rights legislation, the Supreme Court embraced this misconceived race neutrality, reasoning, only twenty years after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, that the legislation at issue would illegitimately make black citizens "the special favorite of the laws." Indeed, the system of segregation with which we are concerned was justified at its inception by a particular conception of race neutrality – that a regime of racial separation could be constitutionally justified so long as it applied neutrally and equally to persons of all races.

The first Justice Harlan, dissenting in *Plessy*, declared our Constitution to be "color-blind," and in doing so provided one of the most famous and compelling articulations of the constitutional guarantee of equality. But in urging us to be "blind" to race,

Justice Harlan did not, as is sometimes suggested, suggest that we be ignorant of it. In *Plessy*, he was the only member of the Court willing to acknowledge the most obvious truth about segregation: "Everyone knows that the statute in question had its origin in the purpose, not so much to exclude white persons from railroad cars occupied by blacks, as to exclude colored people from coaches occupied or assigned to white persons." Thirteen years earlier, dissenting in the Civil Rights Cases, Justice Harlan rejected the notion that civil rights legislation made blacks a "special favorite of the laws," and he criticized the majority's reasoning as "narrow and artificial."

We recognize now, as Justice Harlan recognized then, that no simple syllogism can enfold all of history's burdens and complexities.

Eliminating race-consciousness from government decision making must be regarded as among our worthiest constitutional aspirations. But that aspiration surely cannot be so rigid that it refuses to distinguish the "race consciousness" that created a segregated school system and the race-conscious efforts necessary to eliminate that system. While most judges are not historians, we must be willing to acknowledge and confront our history. If we fail to do so, we risk falling into a mode that equates the cure with the disease: civil rights with favoritism, desegregation with segregation. As American citizens, we know better.

We are honored to state that Judge Michael and Judge Gregory join in this opinion.

### Principles of editing

In editing this document, all legal citations were removed, as were most notes. One note, which explained paired schools and satellites, was inserted in the text inside (parentheses). Discussion of attorney fees and discovery disputes was eliminated, with a note in the text within [brackets]. All other uses of brackets are in the original text. The small headlines breaking up the text generally follow the court's usage, but some have been inserted for ease of reading. The full text of the ruling is on the Internet at [www.ca4.uscourts.gov](http://www.ca4.uscourts.gov)