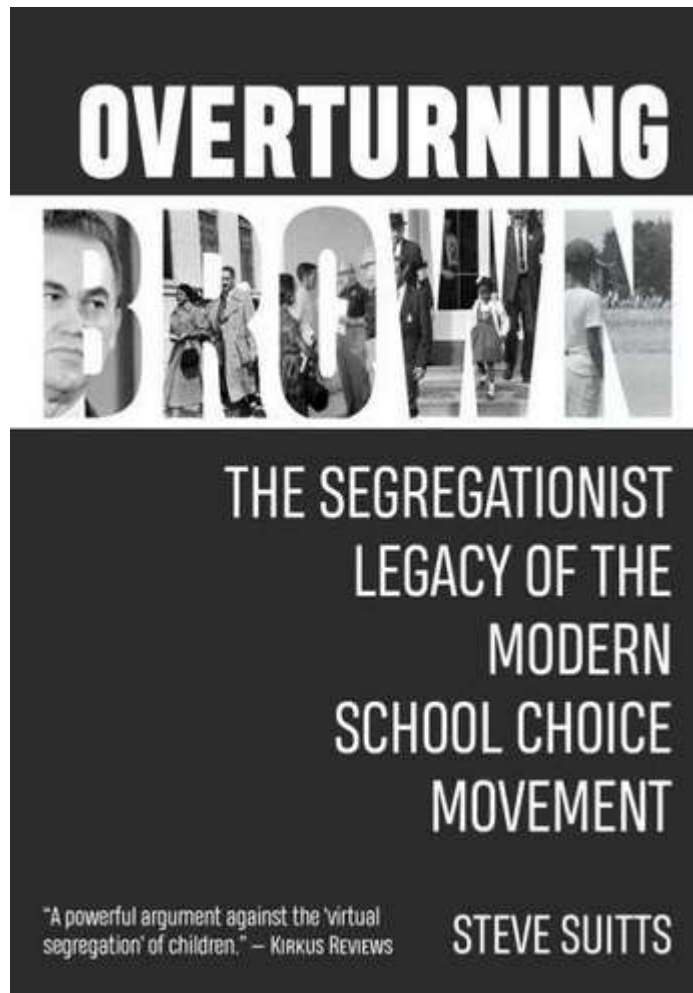


Frightening Exposé

It's viewed as a much-needed call-to-arms

Posted: Sunday, May 24, 2020

Overturing Brown: The Segregationist Legacy of the Modern School Choice Movement by Steve Suits. Montgomery, Ala.: NewSouth Books, 2020, 150 pages, \$25.95.



“The United States has never been closer to adopting a nationwide program in which the state and federal governments spend billions of tax dollars to finance largely unaccountable private schools,” Steve Suits explains near the beginning of “Overturing Brown: The Segregationist Legacy of the Modern School Choice Movement,” his recently-released treatise on the current direction education seems to be heading in this country.

“By the beginning of 2019, more than half of the 50 states had enacted a variety of voucher programs diverting public funds to private schools and in some places to home-schooling – often for the purported purpose of improving the education of low-income African American and Hispanic students,” he continues. “These programs use state appropriations or tax credits to divert public monies to support self-governing schools, often with few requirements or restrictions.”

Let me cut to the chase. Suits is not a fan of school choice, and his disdain for charter schools is rooted in his lifelong advocacy for civil rights. Much of the book is a history

lesson on the struggle to overcome segregation, both directly and more implicitly, within the public education system in America. Suits explains the sociocultural as well as the economic and political conditions that led to the U.S. Supreme Court’s unanimous decision to overturn the “separate but equal” legal doctrine with *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. He then proceeds to take the reader through the next 64 years, showing how segregationists never really abandoned their efforts to return to an era in which advantages are made available to some while being systematically denied to others.

In essence, Suits makes a convincing case that the modern school choice movement is, at its core, an attempt to return to de facto segregation. He outlines several parallels between the discriminatory policies and practices of the past and the current administration’s obvious bias when it comes to how we should be educating our youth. In a very detailed and categorical manner, the author illuminates the true motives behind the so-called civil rights policies of Education Secretary Betsy

DeVos and the well-connected and equally well-funded lobbyists who are attempting to shape federal, state and local education policy behind the scenes.

“Overturning Brown” is extensively researched, with 20 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the 14 relatively succinct chapters that form the main narrative. I was also impressed with the numerous historical pictures, maps, charts and other graphics that permeate the manuscript and bring the prose to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. It is apparent from the very first page that Suitts has done his homework. Moreover, his literary style is accessible to a general audience and fairly straightforward; he is telling a very important story and he wants the reader to share his enthusiasm for the subject matter.

The founding director of the Alabama Civil Liberties Union, Suitts began his career as a staff writer for the Selma Project. A longtime adjunct professor at Emory University, he also served as executive director of the Southern Regional Council and as program coordinator, vice president and senior fellow of the Southern Education Foundation. More recently, he served as chief strategist for Better Schools Better Jobs, a Mississippi-based education advocacy program associated with the New Venture Fund. He is perhaps best known as executive producer and a writer for “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” a 13-hour Peabody-winning public radio series on the history of the Southern civil rights movement. This is his second book, the first being “Hugo Black of Alabama: How His Roots and early Career Shaped the Great Champion of the Constitution,” which was published in 2005.

The truth is there has always been a significant segment of the population – sometimes silent, sometimes more vocal – who have never accepted the basic premise that everyone deserves access to a quality education, regardless of their race, religious preference or socioeconomic status. Rather than improve the entire system so everyone has access to a high-quality education, they feel it’s perfectly fine to have “winners” and “losers” when it comes to the schools students are required to attend. Underneath all the high-minded rhetoric and faux civil rights jargon, however, the reality is that many middle-class white parents don’t want their children attending school with “those” kinds of students.

“Since the 1960s, white flight from urban public systems such as Atlanta’s had maintained and extended segregated patterns in private tax-exempt schools and in suburban public schools,” Suitts observes in “No to ‘Racial-Mixing,’ Yes to Vouchers,” the 11th chapter and one of the more informative as far as I am concerned. “On both sides of the Mason-Dixon line, many white middle-class parents had escaped the mandates of school desegregation by moving into suburban neighborhoods where residential patterns of racial isolation and economics provided virtually segregated public schools.”

“This new era of vouchers emerged as public schools across the nation experienced a substantial increase in the numbers of low-income students and students of color,” he continues a little later. “Completing a trend that began in the 1980s, low-income students (those eligible for free or reduced lunch) became a majority of the South’s public schoolchildren in 2006; in 2009, the South’s public schools also had a majority of students of color. By 2013, more than 50 percent of the nation’s public schoolchildren were from low-income families and almost half were children of color.”

I found “Overturning Brown” to be a frightening exposé, a passionate warning and a much-needed call-to-arms for all those who are concerned about the current status of education in the United States. Suitts has both the credentials as well as the credibility to raise the alarm; we need to be paying attention. Highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.