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Saturday, 07/07/07

Court sets stage for race-neutral schools

By CAROL M. SWAIN

The Supreme Court's recent decision in *Parents vs. Seattle* nudges the nation further along the path of race-neutral decision-making in the educational arena.

Unlike the 2003 Michigan cases that dealt with racial preferences in higher education, the latest case strikes down the use of race in K-12 pupil assignment in Louisville and Seattle. By doing so, the court agreed with the parents that the diversity plans violated rights of white students to attend schools of their choice.

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How should we view the 5-4 decision, in which the fifth vote by Justice Anthony Kennedy still makes allowance for

schools to pursue the praiseworthy goal of greater diversity through race-neutral measures? Presumably, these would include magnet schools and plans that use socioeconomic factors rather than race to promote greater diversity.

The Supreme Court decision was not unexpected, and should not be received as a blow. Instead, it could have the positive outcome of forcing minority advocates to work collectively toward identifying race-neutral strategies to improve the educational experiences of students trapped in low-performing schools.

Changing cultural norms

The ruling does not have to be viewed as a huge setback for those concerned about failing urban schools. Instead, it can provide a new opportunity for concerned citizens of all races to focus their energies and resources on improving the educational experience of students in low-performing schools. One aspect of this must involve changing the cultural norms and behavioral patterns that work against high achievement among large numbers of minority youth in segregated schools.

Since Nashville does not use race in pupil assignments and the city has been recognized as having some of the nation's best magnet schools, it will be little affected by the *Parents vs. Seattle* ruling. Nevertheless, there are thousands of minority students trapped in low-performing Metro schools who deserve more resources, better teachers and involved parents.

I believe measurable success can be attained in graduation rates and in achievement scores, when we expand our efforts beyond diversity gestures to identify and address negative factors that impede minority success.

All of us can make it our business to monitor and address inequities in school funding and local decisions that place poor schools at a competitive disadvantage for basic goods and



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As we mull over the court's decision, we should remember that the integration promises of *Brown vs. Board of Education* have never been achieved. Racially segregated housing, size and distribution of minority populations and the overrepresentation of minorities among the poor have prevented meaningful school integration.

Consequently, it makes strategic sense to direct our collective energies to improving the experiences that minority students can have in segregated schools. A key component is identifying and changing negative cultural norms that limit and structure the ability of minorities to compete effectively in the classroom and in the larger society.

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