New York’s Blacks Appeal For Better Schools, 1857

The New York Society for the Promotion of Education Among Colored Children—a Negro organization with Charles B. Ray as president and Philip A. White as secretary—presented on Dec. 28, 1857, a carefully documented paper supporting requests for improvement in the education of Negro children to a special commission appointed by the Governor to investigate the city’s schools. This document was published in the New York Negro magazine, The Anglo-African, in July, 1859 (1, pp. 222-24) with the following note appended to it: "Although, nearly two years old, it is of intrinsic value as a record of what Caste Schools are, when left to the tender mercies of a Board of Education, whose members feel themselves little if at all responsible to colored voters. It is, nevertheless, one of the most effective documents ever issued by an association of colored men, for since it was written, and mainly in consequence of it, the School-house in Thomas street has been removed to the corner of Hudson and Franklin street, one of the finest locations in the fifth ward; the school-house in Mulberry street has been taken down, to be replaced immediately by a new and elegant structure, replete with all the modern furniture and equipments; and a handsome sum has been appropriated to re-model the school-house in Laurens street. Yet there are men among the colored people who say, that we cannot do anything in this land!"

The following statement in relation to the colored schools in said city and county is respectfully presented by the New York Society for the Promotion of Education among Colored Children:

1. The number of colored children in the city and county of New York (estimated in 1855 from the census of 1850), between the ages of 4 and 17 years 3,000

2. The number of white children in the city of New York in 1855 (estimated as above), between the ages of 4 and 17 years 159,000

b. Proportion of average attendance in public schools of colored children to whole number of same is as 1 to 2.60

2. The number of white children in the city of New York in 1855 (estimated as above), between the ages of 4 and 17 years 159,000

Average attendance of white children in public schools in 1855 43,858

Average attendance of do. in corporate schools supported by public funds, 2,826

Proportion of average attendance of white children in public schools to whole number of the same is as 1 to 3.40

3. From these facts it appears that colored children attend the public schools (and schools supported by public funds in the city of New York) in the proportion of 1 to 2.60, and that white children attend similar schools in said city in the proportion of 1 to 3.40; that is to say, nearly 25 per cent more of colored children than of white children attend the public schools, and schools supported by public funds in the city of New York.

4. The number of colored children attending private schools in the city of New York, 125.

a. The number of white children attending private schools in 1850, census gave 10,175, which number has since been increased by the establishment of Catholic parochial schools, estimated in 1856, 17,560.
b. The proportion of colored children attending private schools to white children attending same, is as 1 to 140.
c. But the average attendance of colored children in all schools is about the same as that of white in proportion, that is to say, as many colored children attend the public schools as do whites attend both public and private schools, in proportion to the whole number of each class of children.

**Locality, capability, &c., of colored schools.**
1. a. The Board of Education, since its organization, has expended in sites and buildings for white schools $1,600,000.
   b. The Board of Education has expended in sites and buildings for colored schools (addition to building leased 19 Thomas) $1,000.
   c. The two school-houses in possession of the Board now used for colored children were assigned to same by the Old Public School Society.
2. The proportion of colored children to white children attending public schools is as 1 to 40.
   a. The sum expended on school-buildings and sites of colored and white schools by the Board of Education is as 1 to 1,600.
3. a. School-house No.1, for colored children, is an old building, erected in 1820 by the New York Manumission Society as a school for colored children, in Mulberry street, in a poor but decent locality. It has two departments, one male and one female; it consists of two stories only, and has two small recitation rooms on each floor, but as primary as well as grammar children attend each department, much difficulty and confusion arises from the want of class room for the respective studies. The building covers only part of the lot, and as it is the best attended, and among the best taught of the colored schools, a new and ample school building, erected in this place, would prove a great attraction, and could be amply filled by children.
   b. School-house No.2, erected in Laurens street more than twenty years ago for colored children by the Public School Society, is in one of the lowest and filthiest neighborhoods, and hence, although it has competent teachers in the male and female departments, and a separate primary department, the attendance has always been slender, and will be until the school is removed to a neighborhood where children may be sent without danger to their morals.
   c. School No.3 for colored children, in Yorkville, is an old building, is well attended, and deserves, in connection with School house No.4, in Harlem, a new building between the present localities.
   d. School-house No.5, for colored children, is an old building, leased at No. 19 Thomas street, a most degraded neighborhood, full of filth and vice; yet the attendance in this school, and the excellence of its teachers, earn for it the need of a new site and new building.
   e. School-house No.6, for colored children, is in Broadway, near 37th street, in a dwelling house leased and fitted up for a school, in which there is always four feet of water in the cellar. The attendance good. Some of the school-officers have repeatedly promised a new building.
   f. Primary school for colored children, No.1, is in the basement of a church on 15th street, near 7th avenue, in a good location, but premises too small for the attendance; no recitation rooms, and is perforce both primary and grammar school, to the injury of the progress of all.
   g. Primary schools for colored children, No.2 and 3, are in the rear of Church, in 2d street, near 6th avenue; the rooms are dark and cheerless, and without the needful facilities of sufficient recitation rooms, &c.

From a comparison of the school-houses with the splendid, almost palatial edifices, with manifold comforts, conveniences and elegancies which make up the school-houses for white children in the city of New York, it is evident that the colored children are painfully neglected and positively degraded. Pent up in filthy neighborhoods, in old and dilapidated buildings, they are held down to low associations and gloomy surroundings.
Yet Mr. Superintendent Kiddle, at a general examination of colored schools held in July last, (for silver medals awarded by the society now addressing your honorable body) declared the reading and spelling equal to that of any schools in the city.
The undersigned enter their solemn protest against this unjust treatment of colored children. They believe with the experience of Massachusetts, and especially the recent experience of Boston before them, there is no sound reason why colored children should be excluded from any of the common schools supported by taxes levied alike on whites and blacks, and governed by officers elected by the vote of colored as well as white voters.

But if in the judgment of your honorable body common schools are not thus common to all, then we earnestly pray you to recommend to the Legislature such action as shall cause the Board of Education of this city to erect at least two well appointed modern grammar schools for colored children on suitable sites, in respectable localities, so that the attendance of colored children may be increased, and their minds be elevated in like manner as the happy experience of the honorable the Board of Education has been in the matter of white children.

In addition to the excellent impulse to colored youth which these new grammar schools would give, they will have the additional argument of actual economy; the children will be taught with far less expense in two such school-houses than in the half dozen hovels into which they are now driven. It is a costly piece of injustice which educates the white scholar in a palace at $10 per year, and the colored pupil in a hovel at $17 or $18 per annum.

**Taxes, &c., of colored population of the city.**

No proposition can be more reasonable than that they who pay taxes for schools and school-houses should be provided with schools and school-houses. The colored population of this city, in proportion to their numbers, pay their full share of the general and therefore of the school-taxes. There are about nine thousand adults of both sexes; of these over three thousand are householders, rent-payers, and therefore tax-payers, in that sense of the word in which owners make tax-payers of their poor tenants. The colored laboring man, with an income of $200 per year, who pays $72 per year for a room and bedroom, is really in proportion to his means a larger tax-payer than the millionaire whose tax-rate is thousands of dollars.

But directly, also, do the colored people pay taxes. From examination carefully made, the undersigned affirm that there are in the city at least 1,000 colored persons who own and pay taxes on real estate:

- Taxed real estate in the city of New York owned by colored persons…$1,400,000
- Untaxed by colored persons (Churches)…………………………………. 250,000
- Personal estate……………………………………………………………. 710,000
- Money in savings banks……………………………………………..…… 1,121,000

$3,481,000

These figures indicate that in proportion to their numbers, the colored population of this city pay fair share of the school-taxes, and that they have been most unjustly dealt with. Their money has been used to purchase sites and erect and fit up school-houses for white children, whilst their own children are driven into miserable edifices in disgraceful localities. Surely the white population of the city are too able, too generous, too just, any longer to suffer this miserable robbing of their colored fellow-citizens for the benefit of white children.