WHY IS THIS HAPPENING?

Why Is This Happening? Investigating school segregation in 2018 with Nikole Hannah-Jones: podcast & transcript

Chris Hayes talks with reporter Nikole Hannah-Jones about why we continue to see classroom segregation – and whether true desegregation is even possible.

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By Why Is This Happening?

Why are American schools resegregating? Over 60 years since the Brown v. Board of Education ruling forced schools to integrate, the nation is witnessing schools become increasingly segregated. So how did we get to this point?

Nikole Hannah-Jones has firsthand knowledge of the system. Beginning in second grade, she was bussed to a wealthy, majority white school as part of a desegregation initiative in her hometown. Now, she's an award-winning investigative reporter writing for The New York Times magazine, doing extensive work on school segregation. In this episode Hannah-Jones talks explains why we continue to see segregation in the classroom and how, if at all, the education system can truly desegregate.

CHRIS HAYES: That's what we have today. We've got segregated schools.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely.

CHRIS HAYES: And one of the things that crazy to me is that everyone just accepts it.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes.

CHRIS HAYES: People will talk about education all the time. And the entire context for conversation about education is literally separate but equal.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes. And we're fine with that. We have been for a long time.

CHRIS HAYES: Hello, and welcome to "Why Is This Happening to Me?" with your host, Chris Hayes. So if you pay any attention whatsoever to

education, to education policy to talks about education, you will hear this phrase all the time which is called the achievement gap. The achievement gap is the central problem at the core of modern education debate and policy, and it's the problem that all the conversation is meant to solve. And what is the achievement gap? The achievement gap is that white children in America and black children have a gap between what their test scores and their achievement are.

And sometimes that gap, depending on how the data is run, even controlling for things like socioeconomic status or income, you see this persistent gap between white children and black children. In fact, that was the whole No Child Left Behind Act was meant to get rid of the achievement gap. Charter schools, get rid of the achievement gap. School choice, right? It's vouchers, get achievement gap. Betsy DeVos' program, get rid of the achievement gap. All the stuff you hear about what we're gonna do in public education in America, a big thing is about getting rid of the achievement gap, making sure that inner-city children are getting a quality education and it's as good an education on par as an education with, say, kids in affluent suburbs.

The logic of the achievement gap is that schooling in America's gonna be separate, okay? Meaning, there's gonna be affluent suburbs that are 80 percent white, 85 percent white, 90 percent white, 95 percent white, and there's gonna be what we call inner-city schools which is not really a geographic designation. That's a designation about race and socioeconomic status and what it means is schools that are filled with poor children and working-class children of color. That's what inner-city means.

So when you talk about the achievement gap, here's what you mean. You got separate schools in America, right? Different groups are going to separate schools, but even though they're separate, they should be equal. So the debate, the logic around the achievement gap, the entire logic of every conversation we have about education almost entirely is a logic of how do we take all these separate schools in which by and large white children and black children go to separate schools, how do we make those separate schools equal? How do we get to separate but equal? Separate but equal? Yeah. Exactly. That phrase. That's the phrase. That's the Plessy v. Ferguson phrase. That is the phrase that is the conceptual bedrock of segregation and Jim Crow. It's the con, it's the shameful, insulting, bad-faith con at the heart of a legal regime that was legalized apartheid in America. And the con at the core of legalized apartheid in America was that just because you separate people, doesn't mean that it's necessarily unequal.

There's gonna be black bathrooms and white bathrooms, but they're gonna be equal bathrooms. There's gonna be black rail cars and white rail cars that are gonna be equal. There are gonna be black schools and white schools, black pools and white pools, black diner counters and white diner counters, but they're all gonna be equal. But of course that was bullshit. Of course the system of separation, American apartheid and segregation was a system of power, control, and hierarchy in which the white stuff was much better than the black stuff.

And that legal regime with all of its ferocious daily evil, with all of the oppression and persecution it endangered with all the misery it produced, the first major blow against that in a constitutional sense after

it had been created post-14th Amendment, after Plessy v. Ferguson basically eviscerated many of the gains of reconstruction, many of the gains of Civil War, the 600,000 who died on the battlefields to bring equality, the battles of the Reconstitution Republicans and the radical Republican after Plessy v. Ferguson had eviscerated that in 1954, the Supreme Court unanimously decides in Brown v. Board of Education that a school district with separate schools in Arkansas is a violation of the Constitution. That separate but equal cannot but inherently be unequal and ergo unconstitutional. Brown v. Board, we all know it. We all love it. We're all pro Brown v. Board because we don't believe in segregation in America, right?

Except if you watch any single education policy debate about the achievement gap which absolutely takes as a given the schools are gonna be segregated.

The segregation of schooling in America declines after Brown v. Board as the government takes on more and more activities to desegregate schools. First in the South, then in North, and then it hits a high point. Schools get as integrated as they're gonna get, I think in the late 1980s, early 1990s, and it starts reversing.

We now have schooling in America that is as segregated as it's been since the 1960s, we have housing in America that is deeply segregated. In fact, America has been going through a process over the last several decades of essentially resegregation. It's not de jure resegregation, right? All that's been struck down by the Civil Rights Act, by the courts. You can't have restrictive covenants, you can't say you cannot rent your house to black people, you can't say you cannot admit this black child in my school. But de facto segregation is on the rise.

I have come to believe, partly through writing my second book, "A Colony and a Nation," that the desegregation, the real desegregation of American life, which never really happened, is one of the most pressing political and moral priorities of the country. Of course, if you say that now, if you go around talking about desegregation, you sound like a crazy person. If you're like, "I'm all about desegregation," it's like, "What are you talking about?"

The one person who has most influenced my thinking on this, on that word and what it means, the one writer, thinker, journalist who has most made me think in these terms and kind of see beneath the surface of many of the conversations we have is a woman named Nikole Hannah-Jones.

And Nikole is a really spectacularly talented individual. She was a reporter for New York Times, and she got a lot of attention a few years ago when she did a piece for This American Life called “The Problem We All Live With.” It was a combination of her history, the schools she attended as a African-American woman who went to a predominantly white school, which would was made possible by desegregation, and the school that Michael Brown went to who was shot dead in Ferguson/St. Louis. And the battle over that school and desegregation in that school district, she has gone onto write a bunch of articles of New York Times Magazine, including a really incredible one about her own daughter and making that very fateful choice about how to educate her own daughter in a system as segregated as New York City schools.

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She's writing a book now that I think is gonna be incredible, it's being edited by an incredible editor named Chris Jackson who edits Ta-Nehisi Coates and Alex Wagner, among others, and she won the MacArthur Genius Fellowship. She's just an incredible combination of searing world vision and just historical reportorial knowledge in one. And she, every time that I read a piece she writes or listen to her, it helps me to reorient my thinking from things I thought I knew or things I thought I knew about which buckets they went into and completely re-conceptualize about how to think about the problem we all face or the problem we all live with, as she puts it.

And so I was incredibly happy, as soon as I got the podcast, she was one of the first few in my head I wanted to have a long conversation with. And I was incredibly happy when little while ago I reached out and she said, "I'd love to come and talk to you about the work that I'm doing." About how it is we got to point in which American life started to resegregate, how it is we got to a point in which we talk about schools as if they are always going to be separate, and maybe we could do something to make them equal. And what it is we could do to bring about a world, to bring about a nation, to bring about a society that was truly, fully, and for the first time in American life desegregated.

You grew up in Iowa? Am I right?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Uh-huh (affirmative).

CHRIS HAYES: You talked about this in this... You did this amazing, amazing piece called “the Problem We All Live With” for This American Life. It's about the high school Michael Brown went to in Ferguson. And in it, you talk a little bit about your own experience going to school. What was that experience?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I grew up in a city called Waterloo, which I always just get this out of the way, there are black people in Iowa. Not a lot of us, we mostly know each other, but we do exist.

CHRIS HAYES: Do you know Ben?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: All right, yeah.

CHRIS HAYES: Oh yeah, I know him.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: What's his last name? Yeah, I know him. We were on the same migration that brought people from Mississippi to Chicago, we just got off the train too early.

CHRIS HAYES: This is not the South Side.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: No. We were that country. We were like, "Oh, the big city." No. No, we didn't make it. So my town was about 15 percent

black in a state that is less than 2 percent black. And we had enough black folks where we were segregated. So the east side of town is where all the black people lived, the schools were black, and starting in the ‘70s, my hometown entered into a "voluntary" desegregation order with the U.S. Department of Education. And I say in quotes because typically, at that point, if you didn't enter into a voluntary agreement, you were going to be sued by the Justice Department and have a court-ordered desegregation. So a lot of northern communities voluntarily desegregated in order to avoid a court battle. And my hometown did that and so the voluntary desegregation plan was an open enrollment plan where parents on the black side of town could opt in to have their children bused into white schools. And I was one of those kids.

CHRIS HAYES: So that's a really interesting idea. It's funny when we talk about school choice. Like, that's school choice, right?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely.

CHRIS HAYES: So your parents were like, "Yeah, we're gonna send her to this school. It's on the other side of town. And that was grade school, right? You were young.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah. Second grade. My older sister and I started getting bused from our mostly black elementary school in second grade. She was older than me, so she was in fifth grade. And we started riding the bus two hours every day and –

CHRIS HAYES: Wow, it's an hour each way?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: An hour each way, and the bus would pick up a bunch of black kids from all across town and drop us off at various schools. So there were only about, to my recollection, eight of us who went to... So my school was the furthest away and the whitest and the richest, which is why my parents chose it.

CHRIS HAYES: In 2018, that's a really good proxy still.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely. If you want to make sure that your kid is going to have the best public school resources that can be offered, then you best go to school with a lot of white kids and a wealthy school. So that's what parents did. All the black kids would get dropped off at the various open enrollment schools, and at the end of the day when all of the white kids who lived in the neighborhood would be playing outside and walking home, we'd be shuttled onto a bus and sent back to our side of town.

CHRIS HAYES: What was the experience like?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I was really young. A lot of people were like, "Oh, my God. What was it like to ride the bus?" And I'm like, "When you're in second grade, you get on the bus and you do what your parents tell you to do." And you don't know that an hour bus ride is long or short. It just is what it is. The school for me academically was great. I got a great education, I was labeled talented and gifted, so I got very rigorous academics and really found my confidence.

I had a teacher named Mrs. Blau who really helped me to blossom as a

writer and a reader. I always loved to read, but she was just very encouraging. But socially it was, of course, very challenging. To be one of a handful of not only black kids but a handful of working-class kids, and then everyone knows that you don't really, it's not your school. They know that you're the only kids being bused in from the other side of town. It was very difficult. It was isolating. My best friend was another black girl who rode the bus with me. And I remember really all the way through never really fitting in, never feeling like this was your school.

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I think clearly having had that experience, I mean, when I talk to a lot of black folks who have gotten into whatever mainstream careers that they're in, it's often people who went through desegregated schools. They learned to adapt to white norms, they learned to speak the "professional white language," they learned to be comfortable in those situations, so I think for us, clearly, it was a means of being able to study what you were going to need to succeed in a white-dominated country. But it wouldn't be easy. I think we shouldn't expect that taking people who have been forcibly and legally separated and putting them in schools together is going to magic, it's gonna be difficult. But I think it's worth the difficulty. We're a multiracial democracy.

I also think there's a big difference between attending a desegregated school and an integrated school. Putting eight black kids in a 300-student elementary school is not a integrated school. It is black kids going into a white school. And my high school which was about 20 percent black, 10 percent other, 70 percent white I would consider much more an integrated school. There were enough of us where our culture had an impact on the school as well. There were enough of us where it wasn't just their school. So I think that's a key difference that we often don't I guess discern the difference between those two.

CHRIS HAYES: Yeah. And those numbers matter so much for the experience for everyone. I mean, what kind of thing you're creating. My experience, I went to public school in the Bronx in the 80s, but because of the racial makeup of the Bronx, the class was whiter than the borough but still less than half white. So it was a really integrated space. And in fact, put me in a lot of situation from a young age of being the only white kid at something.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Right.

CHRIS HAYES: Which was a really, really, really important, good experience that a lot of white people don't get to experience.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I would say most.

CHRIS HAYES: Most don't.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Right? It is rare.

CHRIS HAYES: It's intense being the only of anything anywhere.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah, tell me about it.

CHRIS HAYES: I mean, that's part of the point. White people should experience that.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: That's right.

CHRIS HAYES: It's a –

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It allows you to relate to the experiences of others in a way that clearly you would never be able to relate. I've heard, since I've been focusing so much on school segregation, from so many white adults who said because of court-ordered desegregation or parents who actively made a choice that they went through schools where they were not the majority and that it was transformative for them. That it just helped them to see things that they couldn't have seen before. It made them better people they think. They also say it wasn't easy.

CHRIS HAYES: Yeah.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I think we should stop pretending that it would be, but again, we don't say that for anything else in life. When you want to be successful, you know it's gonna be hard. But for this, we want it to be easy because we really don't want to do it.

CHRIS HAYES: That's right. I think the other part of it, this is true in the context of race. It's also I think partly true in the context of class, which is like how much of American social mobility is dependent upon performing, sounding like a person of a certain class.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely. I think it's a huge part. And this is one of the arguments that I make when our common and perennial answer to segregation is, "Well, we just need to fund high-poverty schools." Well, we do, but there are intangible things that you lose when you're in a segregated entirely poor school. And one of those things is that by being isolated from the language and the culture of those who run your country who will run the businesses that you may want to work for, you can't make up for that isolation by throwing more dollars and getting better textbooks.

In my daughter's school, which she attends a 95 percent free/reduced lunch school that serves a federal housing project. If there's a kid there who has dreams of going to Notre Dame or dreams of being a newspaper reporter, there's no one there if I'm not there who can say, "Oh, I went to Notre Dame, I'll write you a recommendation. Oh, I know how to get you an internship." These are working-class people. They work but they don't have connections. And then you can go a mile away to PS8 and you could get 20 of those recommendations. You can have people who can get you internship at any job you want. That's what you can't make up for by simply giving the same funding to those schools, so you just recreate and maintain the class status that already exist.

CHRIS HAYES: It's so true. Not even before you get to, "I want to be a reporter and there's a mom in my school who's a reporter," it's like a reporter's a thing you can be.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: That's right.

CHRIS HAYES: Even I had, again, it's very different, but I went from this public school in the Bronx and then I went to this high school, this magnet school in Manhattan. And it had a lot of kids who were of affluent professional New York. One kid's mom was an assistant manager editor of New York Times. And I'm like... Even thinking about that as a job that a person could have kind of blew my mind.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Exactly. Yeah.

CHRIS HAYES: The social capital that you have access to in those spaces I just feel like everyone undercounts all the time.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Well, we do and we don't. So when you look at the language of white, middle to upper-class people who don't want to desegregate their schools, they are very clear-

CHRIS HAYES: They give it away.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: ...on the social capital and why. They're very clear on wanting to hoard these resources. That they understand that going to schools with a certain social class opens doors for their kids. They pretend they don't know when we talk about giving other kids access to that or how important that is for other kids, but they certainly know. That resource hoarding is key to why we ever had segregation in the first place because it ensured that white Americans were getting an inordinate amount of the resources. And it's the same reason why we maintain it today. When you hear the way we talk about, it's like, these kids, because they are lower class, have nothing to offer the schools or these kids. They bring nothing. That's how we talk about it, but I have everything. That is the way that we believe which is not true, but we understand the commodity of who parents are in a building and what that does for kids.

CHRIS HAYES: That's a great point. And there's also the argument that happened in the opposite direction, which is they're gonna contaminate –

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely.

CHRIS HAYES: ...our school with their negative social capital. That they are going to undo the mores. My kid if learning how to talk in a way, and then he's gonna be around these... And people don't quite say it in these terms, but it's the fear. He's gonna start talking like those kids.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It's perfectly fine you clearly cannot say – though Trump's America who knows – but typically we have gotten past the point where you can say I don't want my kid in school with a bunch of black kids. We still find it perfectly acceptable to say I don't want my kid in a school with a lot of poor kids. Now we all know what that means but that's fine because then it's about well you know the behavior problem and the safety and the parents aren't involved, it's not race. It's just you know they're poor and I just don't want to do that except we also know that in America you're almost always talking about the same group of kids.

CHRIS HAYES: It's also, the thing that makes this conversation so fraught and tricky is that it's also true for the same reason that your parents sent

you to the rich white school because the system is created the way it is...

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes.

— Students in a segregated ninth-grade classroom in Summerton, South Carolina, in 1954. Rudolph Faircloth / AP file

CHRIS HAYES: A good school is a school that has by and large a largely white affluent student population.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes but what we fail to acknowledge what makes that school good is not the kids but the resources those kids are ensured. This was the whole reason behind school desegregation beginning when the NAACP starts to challenge school segregation in the 40s. It was not saying there's something remarkable about white kids that makes black kids smart. It was saying that we have been promising since Plessy v. Ferguson to make separate equal and there's never been a single moment in time where black kids isolated from white kids got even close to the same resources. It literally is about needing to have proximity to get the same things. There's just been no other way to do that. Of course, those parents understand that too and they believe they deserve more resources because they believe they worked harder, the mayor of New York City when he was asked last year, the year before about school segregation, said you know people buy into certain neighborhoods to get access to good schools. Okay, but everyone doesn't have equal opportunity to buy in those neighborhoods clearly...

CHRIS HAYES: Yeah.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: That's why they're so damn expensive.

CHRIS HAYES: You literally just annunciated the problem. That's literally the problem.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It's also saying that the people in my neighborhood which is a poor neighborhood somehow want the schools that they have, which they don't. They want the schools that you have but they can't get access to those schools. I think that is, it's the hypocrisy of it all, it's pretending that there's free choice in the housing market and therefore free choice in the school market and there isn't.

CHRIS HAYES: You just talked about Brown. I want to talk about desegregation, school desegregation, sort of what happened there and then the retrenchment because there's sort of, it's crazy. You can even look on a graph and it's like the line goes in one direction, then it hits an inflection point I think in the 1990s if I'm not mistaken...

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah, '88.

CHRIS HAYES: In '88 and then just starts going in the other direction. The schools desegregate and then they start resegregating. Let's talk 54 to 88, then, right. What's going on in those 34 years that's moving that in the right direction where schools are desegregated?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: All right well we got about two hours? Just playing. The Supreme Court rules in '54 and I think it's good to pause and think about how radical of a ruling that is.

CHRIS HAYES: It's crazy and the story behind that ruling is fascinating in and of itself.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It is. It's been accepted law for 60 years so I think we forget. Overnight the court overturns racial apartheid in education that had been the law of the land for 60 years and the way of the south for longer than that, overnight, understanding that that will overturn racial apartheid in every other aspect of American life. I think we just forget that it was a crazy ruling, not crazy but very radical. If we understand that then we understand why we have had so much difficulty in implementing it. The first ten years of Brown v. Board there is no desegregation occurring in the country at all, the South launches in a massive resistance. They say it is an illegitimate court. They just refuse to desegregate…

CHRIS HAYES: Impeach Earl Warren billboards by the side and basically you and what army, literally.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: And it was. The only way you could get enforcement and you see this in the Little Rock crisis is the NAACP which is a small civil rights organization that depends on donations has to sue every single southern school district to force them to comply with Brown which they cannot do, it's impossible. What changes is in 1964 with the passage of the Civil Rights Act, what many of us don't know is outside of public accommodations it also for the first time gives the Justice Department the right to sue for school desegregation itself. Now you have the power of the federal government in these cases. It also says that money can be stripped from school districts for not complying with school desegregation orders and at the same time we increase federal funding to schools.

It's the carrot and the stick. You see the Justice Department beginning to join these suits in suing various school districts. The court gets, the Supreme Court finally decides ten years is long enough to pretend that we did not make this ruling and it begins to issue even stricter and stricter rulings and then very quickly from '68 to '72 the dominoes fall all across the south. Within about six years you go from complete apartheid still in the South to the South becoming the most integrated part of the country which it remains. A majority of black kids in the South by 1972 are attending desegregated schools, majority white schools. The North pretends that Brown has nothing to with it whatsoever and does nothing until NAACP starts suing in the North as well.

CHRIS HAYES: That what you just said there is, I want to just pause that schools to this day the most integrated schools, the South is the region with the most integrated schools.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely, now this has been true as I said since 1972 yet people are still shocked by this all the time which tells us the myth making we have about the North. Also, when the NAACP starts suing northern school districts, we like to make this distinction of de facto versus de jure segregation. De facto was not required by law, it means by a matter of fact. It just exists out of nowhere.

CHRIS HAYES: You're in that neighborhood, I'm in this neighborhood, we have different neighborhood schools...

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: De jure of course was what we typically think of as southern because it was very literally in the law. Judges in the North start finding that in fact the segregation of the North was also de jure. That it was a matter of official policy, it was a matter of law and it wasn't just happenstance and began ordering school desegregation in the North but don't get very far in the North. We've never really seen real desegregation outside of the South. Lyndon B. Johnson declines to run again for re-election. Richard Nixon runs on a southern strategy where he explicitly promises to stop forward progress on school and housing integration. Of course the southern strategy is this coalition of white southerners and white northern ethnics. It is called a southern strategy because, as George Wallace understood the whole country is the South, but he is looking at white northern ethnics who don't want school integration coming to them.

CHRIS HAYES: My favorite detail about this is that one of the master minds of his political strategy Kevin Phillips is from the Bronx, is from a white ethnic neighborhood in the Bronx where he saw firsthand how racial politics works, knew what he was doing and the southern strategy worked because it was appealing to white folks all over the place.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: That's right, it only works because he's able to appeal to white people outside of the South. Nixon appoints four justices to the Supreme Court which we're also in a period right now where that is possible that we can have a president appointing four justices to the Supreme Court and he remakes the court. It's no longer the Warren court which of course is very progressive and it keeps expanding the rights of black children to integrated education. This court immediately, one of the first school desegregation cases it gets is a Detroit case which is calling for metro wide desegregation of Detroit and the Supreme Court finds a constitutional violation but knocks it down, it says you cannot force these white suburbs to integrate with the city of Detroit. Of course there were no white people left in the city of Detroit to integrate with. That's been the story of the North is individual cities have come under desegregation orders but had no white children left because in the North you just move across an invisible municipal line to an all white community with its all white school district and you can avoid integration.

CHRIS HAYES: It's literally the reason people are doing it...

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes. It's explicit...

CHRIS HAYES: That's what white flight is.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: And now implicit but yes, white people stayed in the cities as long as they believed they could keep their white schools. When they saw integration coming they left.

CHRIS HAYES: Let me play devil's advocate on behalf of the white exodus folks, right. The conversation here is constantly slipping between race and poverty, right? Precisely the way you said right, you can't say we don't want black kids at our school. You can say we don't want poor kids but it is also the case that race and poverty are intensely correlated because of the legacy of segregation and because of the legacy of white supremacy.

When people are fleeing like crime which is a code word and fleeing like the neighborhood is getting bad which is a code word, they're also fleeing crime. They're also fleeing the public services getting worse. It's both things, right?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: There are a bunch of things of course that are happening in this period. One you have de-industrialization and that's just happening in and of itself. You are seeing the loss of jobs from these rust belt cities and so white people are able to move out to the suburbs but this is where race comes into play where the government is building highways, they're funding suburbs that explicitly say black people cannot move into them. White people are fleeing cities which are losing jobs but the jobs are going out to the suburbs where they are allowed to live. And so you build this underclass, even though black people then and now are disproportionately poor, most black people then and now are not poor. The white poor live in middle class white neighborhoods, they do not live in concentrated poverty.

Middle class black people live in poor black neighborhoods. Yes, it is race and class but when we look at white flight... so white flight is triggered partially of course by de-industrialization which is white people being able to move but also the great migration which brings half of the black people out of the South into the North and suddenly this progressive bastion is revealed because it was only progressive because there were no black people there. It's very easy to be progressive on race when you don't have to deal with black people. They're also fleeing large numbers of black people who are coming and settling into the city and they don't want to live around them.

In 1968 the open housing law, fair housing act gets passed and there becomes a fear that we can't contain this population any longer. Then you bring in the prospect of school integration and I think you already have white people leaving the city but then that explosion really happens. Then yes crime does rise as a result because your tax base is gone, when your tax base leaves your city services can't be funded. Interestingly, you look at most of these urban cities taxes are very high because lower income black people vote again and again to tax themselves trying to make up for loss of income, trying to fund their schools but they're taxing on nothing and they can't produce ...

CHRIS HAYES: Diminishing tax base, right. You've got the court refusing to sort of use a metro plan, creates the conditions by which well this is how we resegregate schools. It will be de facto because you'll have urban centers that are predominantly black, exclusively black in schools and you'll have surrounding white suburbs. There's other stuff that starts to happen too to roll back desegregation like what?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Right, the Supreme Court doesn't do too much with desegregation after the 70s. Ronald Reagan gets elected and Ronald Reagan decides that after 20 years of court ordered desegregation we've done enough on this. His justice department is hostile to school desegregation orders. To be clear wherever we have had actual desegregation it has always been forced. It has never been voluntary. The South becomes integrated because the courts are forcing the South to integrate. These court orders go on until a court says you have eliminated all of the segregation that's possible, we're going to release you from the order. Once school systems are released from the order they can do

whatever they want.

They can resegregate every single school as long as they never say they're doing it to be discriminatory, they can do whatever they want. Reagan begins to close out these school desegregation orders and immediately as soon as these recalcitrant school districts who never wanted it in the first place get released they began to do things to resegregate the schools. Then in the 90s the Supreme Court, again a very conservative court issues three rulings right in succession that make it much easier for school districts to prove that they've done all that they can. The term the court used was “you've desegregated to the amount practicable,” which just basically is like “we tried. We still have all these black schools but we tried really hard, there's nothing else we can do and the court says that's fine.”

You see this wave of hundreds of school districts being released from court order, often being sued by a single white child who didn't get to go to the school of his or her choice could bring down a desegregation order that was ensuring integrated schools for entire black population of a school district. This was the case in Charlotte, which was the first busing case that went to the Supreme Court, it's when the Supreme Court upheld busing for school desegregation and it became one of the most stably integrated and prosperous school districts in the country and then a white northerner from New Jersey came down and believed he should be able to buy into a neighborhood and buy into a white school. His daughter was not allowed to go to that neighborhood school because she was bused for integration and he takes down the entire school desegregation order and Charlotte now has almost completely re-segregated. That's what we see. The peak of school integration is in 1988, one generation after we begin we've already begun to go backwards.

Even at the peak not even half of black kids in this country were attending majority white schools. Black population is about 13 percent and even at our best not even half of black kids were at a majority white school and that's largely because the North, because the North was simply impervious to court ordered desegregation after the Supreme Court ruled in the Detroit case.

CHRIS HAYES: I mean that's what we have today. We've got segregated schools.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Absolutely.

CHRIS HAYES: One of the things that's crazy to me is that everyone just accepts it like all, people will talk about education all the time. The entire context for conversation about education is literally separate but equal.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes. We're fine with that. We have been for a long time. We never really wanted integration anyway, it was hard. It was working but it was hard, took a lot and we were very happy to say look there's no laws requiring this anymore. We all have civil rights. We all have equal rights so anything that's left now is just black people are poor...

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CHRIS HAYES: Right and then they live in poor areas...

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: They live in poor areas so what do you expect us to do? Everyone gave up on it.

CHRIS HAYES: I think people gave up on in a broad sense the political and social project of desegregation was abandoned.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes.

CHRIS HAYES: No one talks about, like if you run in 2018 saying I'm running on desegregation people look at you like you're insane.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes, the two areas of civil rights where we have made the least progress housing and schools because that is civil rights made personal. Everything else like I don't want to swim with black people I build a pool in my backyard and I don't have to go to the public pool. I don't want to eat with black people I can move in my neighborhood and because there's no black people in this white neighborhood there's no black people in the restaurant in my neighborhood. When you start talking about letting people move next to me, I can no longer control who I'm coming in contact with. Schools are a step further because it is my child away from me in a building where I don't even see what's happening with my child, right. It's so personal and that's why we have made the least progress.

When Lyndon B. Johnson is passing the most expansive civil rights legislation since Reconstruction, fair housing is the one that he wants introduce as early as '64 and they're like, his aids tell him if you want to pass anything else you can't deal with housing because you lose all your white northern support when you go after housing because housing is how segregation and every other aspect of life was accomplished in the North. The North was savvier by not putting these explicitly into law. Now the South, they just adapted the strategies of the North. Now you see in the South, the South because it was agrarian by nature most school districts were county wide which is why your desegregation orders were naturally county wide. They were metropolitan because of that. The North...

CHRIS HAYES: That's why it worked.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Exactly.

CHRIS HAYES: I mean worked more than other places.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Some for racial reasons but also just because the North developed as much more urban, would have, you can have two

dozen school districts in a single county which makes metro-wide desegregation a lot harder. Now you have southern communities that are trying to break off from larger county wide school districts in order to be able to have these white enclaves and white schools and they have studied the way it works in the North and they're now adapting it.

CHRIS HAYES: Then you've got a situation in which you wrote this great piece about figuring out where you were going to send your daughter to school. I had the same issue, I mean obviously coming from a different perspective but if you say to yourself to me I went into it saying it was one of the most important formative experience of my life that I went to a truly integrated public school as a child and I want to do the same for my daughter. Good luck finding that in New York City.

— Linda Brown Smith was a third grader when her father started a class-action suit in 1951. That suit would lead to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1954

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It's hard. We have so much inequality that everything both in housing and in schools is the extremes and there are a handful of truly integrated schools but that's not the experience in most of the schools. The inequality makes it even harder. I write about how black poor schools are deprived systematically of resources and then you're asking someone who has resources to put their kid in a school that I've just said doesn't have resources. That inequality makes it difficult and also makes it convenient. Then you can say it's not that I don't want to but this school is just not actually good, right. It's those two things when you have such inequality in a system and integration becomes even harder.

CHRIS HAYES: It's also because, what I find maddening about it too is that the structure, I've talked about this on the podcast in the context of housing, right. The structure is sort of invisible to you, it's just there and then you walk around making these individual choices of whether a citizen or as a consumer and you unilaterally can't overcome the structure. For instance, in New York you as a white person you can move into a majority black neighborhood. You're going to bring with that all sorts of different... it does, right? The structure is still there. It has to be a collective political project to undo it. It has to be a collective...

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Work to undo it.

CHRIS HAYES: Yeah.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: What I always say is, the inequality is systemic, but it is also held up by individual choices.

CHRIS HAYES: Right.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: So, I think either way. When we say, "Oh, it's just the structure," then we also justify individual choices, because you're like, "I can't solve all of school inequality in the city, so it's okay if I put my kid in this all white, rich school, 'cause I can't fix it all." But at the same time, every time a white parents makes that choice collectively –

CHRIS HAYES: They're reinforcing.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: ...you have reinforced that. What's interesting also is, white people in this city and in almost every city that I have covered, they enforce both of those things. They enforce it at the individual level and structurally. Right?

So, we can look at... I mean, this may be a good Segway into the specialized high schools or you look at the battle with my own daughter's school, which is the black school and the white school down the street, was overcrowded and then the department of education wanted to rezone some of those white kids into our daughter's school, those parents got together and fought.

CHRIS HAYES: Flipped the fuck out.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: That's a structural change. Right? If those parents came immediately, our school would no longer be high poverty. It would be half white and Asian. It would be half reduced lunch immediately, if they came. They fought the structure, too.

CHRIS HAYES: That to me is the craziest –

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It's both.

CHRIS HAYES: Yeah. I mean, you will never see ferocity, like a bunch of white parents, fighting a zoning change.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah.

CHRIS HAYES: What I find truly maddening about the situation in New York City, which is an extremely segregated place, is that you can... There is the ability to produce a kind of integration that would be a net-net benefit for everyone in the kind of way that you're talking about. Yes, I understand white parent, you do not want your little white child taken halfway across the city, and to go to a school that is majority black and poor. It's under resourced, it's whatever. Also, you've got some racial hangups, right?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes.

CHRIS HAYES: But there's a world you could create, in which that's not even happening. That you're integrating the schools with that not even happening.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes. I have a lot of parents who, white parents who, after my talks, come up for their absolution, which I never give, but who will say, "I don't even see race, but I don't want my kid to be the only one."

CHRIS HAYES: Right, right.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: So, I'm like, "Well, if you don't see race, the only what?" Because the only what, right? They actually are all children. It's not your kid's hangup. It's yours. Let's not pretend we don't see race, but then you're afraid your child being the only one, and then I'm also like, "This is the experience of black people all the time," but fine. There's a

bunch of things at work here. I don't believe that public schools are just about your individual child.

CHRIS HAYES: I agree.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: And getting advantage for your individual child.

CHRIS HAYES: I agree.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I also realize that's fairly unnatural. Right? I mean, as a parent, I think you are wired to try to get every benefit for your child. So, I understand that the thought of giving that benefit up is very hard for most parents, no matter what their color is, no matter what their economic status is, but it's also like, you're actually not really giving that much up. These are kids who have advantage in every aspect of life.

Their parents, like me, can make up for any disadvantage academically, my child might get in that school and these are public schools. I'm not even dealing with parents who opt out of public schools, the public system altogether, but that you think that any group or type of parents should have exclusive access to publicly funded schools, I think it's hypocritical. I think it's immoral, and that you feel like you should enter a public system, and be protected from the majority of the kids in that system.

Don't brag to me about how proud you are to be a public school parent, when your public school is 10 percent poverty and 80 percent white. That's a private school on the public dime. I just don't morally believe in it. I think we have allowed the terms of the market to seep into what is a public good. We now feel like we should be able to shop for schools. Schools should have to vie for us. Our kids are no longer people who are teaching to be citizens, but people who are teaching to make a lot of money one day. You know, I think when we have let that terminology seep into the way that we think about public schools, then it feels very natural to say, "Hey, you're not good enough. Don't taint my kid's school." That's not what public schools are supposed to be, though.

CHRIS HAYES: Right. That first thing you said about... I don't think maximizing advantage is a project we should be engaged in, or sort of morally justifiable as a project, but I get that parents don't think that way. That is the way they think.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes. I'm a realistic person.

CHRIS HAYES: Well, I guess my-

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Except I don't... The thing is... This is why so much of my work is... I don't even deal with Trump supporters or whatever, right? So much of my work is around people, who actually say they believe in this shit.

CHRIS HAYES: Yeah, yeah, right.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It's one thing if you're like, "Actually, I don't care, I think we should privatize all schools. I don't believe in a public good. I don't believe in any of this." That's something else. The people who my work is targeting, are progressive people, who say, they believe in

public goods, they believe in equality. They don't believe segregation should exist.

Then you have to stop making choices that uphold segregation, because if you think you can rid our community, or our country of inequality without giving up a single thing, you're either naïve, or you're just a hypocrite. You're not realistic and these people are not dumb people, so, I know they know.

CHRIS HAYES: But I guess that's the question, right? I mean, part of the question is, are they... that is a deep question about school integration to me is like, "Are they giving something up?" Because my sense of the literature, is that they're not actually even giving something up.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It depends on how you're defining it, right?

CHRIS HAYES: Right, right.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I often joke like, I was busted into the school from the poor black side of town and I was smarter than every kid in that school, right? I was the one they didn't want and like, "Y'all were beneath me." But I don't think that we actually believe that, right? I think even very progressive people think that there are exceptional black kids, but most black kids aren't as good as their kids.

I really think that that's true. I don't think they want to admit that to themselves, but I really think that that's true. So, academically, test scores don't go down in desegregated schools or integrated schools, we know that the peak of integration, white test scores were rising just along with black folks, so, the gap was closing.

We know that socially, it's good. We know that just in terms of problem solving skills, right? It just makes sense, if everyone comes from the same background, you think about a problem the same way. So, having people from diverse points of view, makes actually you intellectually stronger.

But what I think is for most white Americans, those are very soft benefits, versus, the hard benefits that they know and have accrued by being able to hoard the best resources for their own kids.

CHRIS HAYES: Which is white privilege. I mean, right?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yes. Right. It's like, they can also be like, "Well, yeah, my PTA can raise a million dollars... well we can have 10 CEOs in our school." Those types of benefits are much more clear to them and I think that is much more important. It's much harder to argue, what to them feels like, kinda politically correct, feels good. It's nice, it's nice if my kid knows how to be around other diverse kids, but don't really need it, 'cause when we get to the C suite everybody is gonna be white anyway.

So, I think it's much harder but the argument on the other hand for black kids and increasingly Latino kids, is like, "Will you actually get a quality education or not?" Period. Like, that's what the game is.

When you look at our standings in the world, in terms of education. Our standings in the world are not where they should be, considering the riches of this country, but that's because we fully have about 40 percent of

our public, of our school children who are attending inferior schools.

If we didn't do that, our standing would be quite high. So, yeah, I think it hurts our own country. One of the arguments I make, because I realize you don't get very far with the moral argument with anyone, I make it because I want you to be ashamed. But I don't think it's gonna move most people, is who the hell pays your social security one day?

Right, when we're a country that is very quickly going to be a minority white country and you're gonna continue to under educate half of the population of your country, than what jobs are they gonna get that are gonna help pay for the infrastructure of this country, that are gonna help pay your social security. That's your own personal concern.

You just can't keep doing that, but I don't know that people think out that far in the future, either.

CHRIS HAYES: They don't, but do I think... I feel like, it brings us back to the parent, right? Which is like, equality to someone with privilege looks like loss and is loss sometimes. I mean, that's the question, right?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah. It can be.

CHRIS HAYES: Like, it can be.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Actually loss.

CHRIS HAYES: It can be actual loss. It looks like loss, it feels like loss. Particularly before you get there. It's scary before you get there. What I want to believe in and I think you believe in it, I think I believe in is like, there's a world of mutual flourishing past that line of equality, but to get back to "the how we get there," like one of the things that I've taken away from your writing on this, is just how fucking hard it is. Like Massive Resistance phrase rings in my head, cause I see it all the time.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: We act like that was in the past. That it's sustained.

CHRIS HAYES: No, no. People flip out. They flip out, they flip out.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah.

CHRIS HAYES: And people that, again who have quote-unquote good politics, who are good white liberals, who go to the Women's March, who like the whole nine. So, then how do we break that?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: If you read my work, you also know it's never hopeful.

CHRIS HAYES: I know, it is not. It is not hopeful.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I don't think we do, I don't think we do. I don't think we will.

CHRIS HAYES: We are under the thumb of white supremacy so heavily.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I mean, it's in the DNA of our country and

nobody wants to give up what they have. Whether they think they earned it or not and most people think they earned what they have. I just don't... My book is tracing the fight for education equality for black kids, all the way back to slavery.

Making the argument that, what we're seeing is not a system that's broken, but a system that is designed. It was designed to produce this inequality. It was designed to keep white people on top, and it does. So, where do you ever find enough sustained effort in a large enough group of people willing to dismantle that, that it becomes systemic.

There's a reason why school segregation is order by the court and doesn't come through Congress, right?

CHRIS HAYES: Oh, yeah.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It's a lifetime appointment, and they just have to deal with it. Politically, it was never possible, and it was enforced by courts. It was not enforced by state legislatures, it just wasn't. The politics of it are impossible, no matter you're in the North, the South, conservative or liberal areas. So, we're clearly not getting anymore orders out of... At least, the federal courts, there's some hope in the state courts.

Outside of it being forced, it's not ever gonna happen. I think you'll see pockets, there's always been pockets of places wanting and willing to work on it. But never in a systemic way and I just don't think we're ever gonna solve it.

CHRIS HAYES: If we're never gonna solve it, then doesn't that just... isn't that the argument of the reformers? Isn't that the argument of the achievement gap people?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah.

CHRIS HAYES: I mean, that's... Their argument is basically that. Their argument is like, "Look, yeah, sure, of course, morally we should integrate the schools, but like you and I know that's not happening so, what we should focus on is, making black schools excellent."

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Yeah, I mean, I wouldn't argue with that. Except that, they have no bit of history on their side either, right? We also have never done that ever, on scale anywhere. There's a reason why every time you bring these issues up, people point to the same five schools, right? Or the same five charter school chains. There's a reason for that, because it's not scalable.

You can look at something like, Success Academy. Oh, I shouldn't even bring up charters 'cause you're gonna get all kinds of hate now. But you look at the purge rates at that school, you look at the amount of additional fundraising they have to do, the philanthropy dollars that are coming in.

You can't scale that across an entire city. You can't scale that across an entire country. So, I don't think that there isn't something inherently bad about a all black learning environment. You can go to all black countries right now and there are excellent schools, but we're not in that context.

We are in a context built on white supremacy. We are in a context where,

having all black environments, means those schools and environments will be starved of resources, as they have been in every community in our country. My daughter is in an all black school because I chose it and culturally, it is amazing for her.Educationally, it is a bit of a sacrifice. It just is. One, I still don't think you can ever make the schools equal for the reasons that I already pointed out, but I also think again, when reformers point that out, show me the example of where we scaled it and I'll shut up.

But you can't. Theirs is just as pie in the sky as mine. I'll say that.

CHRIS HAYES: I mean, I'm just sitting here being like, "Are we gonna end the conversation on like, it's equally hopeless in either direction?"

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: So, this is literally the argument I have with my editors every time I finish a piece, because they always want me to end on a hopeful note.

CHRIS HAYES: I'm not saying –

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: And I'm always like, "No, I'm not taking on this journey of like, how fucked up it is and then letting you off at the end." What I will say is, it does not-

CHRIS HAYES: But don't fear that it's enervating?

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: ...relieve us of the duty to try to fix it. Because while I'm not in general a hopeful person, I think about my great-great grandparents who were born into slavery, my life they couldn't have imagined. My grandmother, who was born on a sharecropping farm, my father who was born on a sharecropping farm in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1946, when there was legal apartheid, where black people were getting strung up every week in the Delta where he lived could not have imagined my life, he didn't even get to see how far I came. So, did Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer believe that they could topple apartheid? Could anybody see that that would actually happen? But it did. So, you have to have people who believe that the system does not have to exist, as it does. I'm just not that person.

I'm the person that exposes the system for what it is and other people have to try to break it down.

CHRIS HAYES: My argument to white people, is that, there's two arguments, right? Like, and I wrote a book on criminal justice trying to make this. One is that like, white supremacy is everywhere and it's moral poison. It's poisoning you, it's poisoning you morally, it's destroying your soul. It's poisoning the way you see the world and you have the capacity to put yourself in other peoples shoes, because humans are amazing creatures and if you actually work at it you could create some discipline where you just... You don't have to be perfect at it, you just have to do it a lot. To try to do it.

But the other argument that is this practical argument, which is a little along the social security line, but like in the criminal justice system, it's like things that are shitty about America are basically all flow out of apartheid and white supremacy. Which is the way we create ... The criminal justice system we have, which by the way puts a ton of white

people behind bars, and forecloses their future and there are a ton very bad white schools and there is a ton of under provisioning of public services for all Americans in this country, that has been born out of the fact that race is the central alignment by which our politics have been driven for so long. It does screw everyone in the end.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: It does.

CHRIS HAYES: I really do believe that.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: I believe that's why we don't have a public health care system. Clearly, every other country we would relate to does. It's the reason why southern states were willing not to expand Medicaid, even though it hurt more white people than black people. It disproportionally hurt black people, so they were still willing to do that.

So, yes white people are being hurt by the racist nature of our country all the time. The problem is, because we are country built on white supremacy, whiteness is more important than those things.

CHRIS HAYES: That is –

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: And how do we change that? Now you solve that, I'mma give you a dollar.

CHRIS HAYES: A dollar? Nikole Hannah-Jones is a journalist, a contributing writer from New York Times Magazine, a MacArthur genius, an actual genius. Those two generally go together, but I think she's a genius, an incredible genius, she's working on a book, "I am Detroit" and I try to get her on the show all the time. It's awesome that we have her on the podcast.

NIKOLE HANNAH-JONES: Thank you so much.

CHRIS HAYES: My great thanks to Nikole Hannah-Jones for joining me. I learned a lot, I've been thinking about this conversation ever since we had it and I've been noticing that the folks out there that are listening to this podcast have a lot of thoughts too, and I'd love to hear them from you.

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