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Pursuing the Dream of Educational Equality

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Pursuing the Dream of Educational Equality

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Sarah Caroline Thuesen. *Greater than Equal: African American Struggles for Schools and Citizenship in North Carolina, 1919–1965*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xv + 366 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00.

More than sixty years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the racial composition of American public schools has faded as a major educational concern for most Americans. Today, preserving—or even achieving—racial diversity in classrooms has taken a backseat to seemingly more pressing issues, as debates over student achievement, standardized testing, teacher training and accountability, and state funding have revealed. At the same time, Supreme Court decisions have freed schools and localities from the burden of having to address enduring racial imbalances in their student populations.

The current debates about race, public education, and *Brown* itself inform Sarah Caroline Thuesen's and Tracy E. K'Meyer's compelling studies of race and schools in North Carolina and Louisville in the twentieth century. Each book situates *Brown* and its legacy in the broader historical context. By doing so, they shift our focus to alternative strategies for educational improvement and uncover different perspectives on *Brown's* long and contested legacy. *Brown* was neither inevitable nor the only possible path toward educational advancement for African Americans. Thuesen's work on North Carolina explores the long-term, deeply felt, but ultimately unsuccessful efforts by black educators, parents, and reformers to achieve equalization of black and white schools rather than the wholesale integration of public schools in the state. Similarly, K'Meyer's study of Louisville shows that criticism that court-ordered busing and other strategies to achieve mixed classrooms were flawed, misguided, and deeply unpopular has served to obscure the reservoir of support for such policies that existed at the time of *Brown* and that persisted for decades after. **[End Page 176]** Taken together, the books simultaneously demonstrate that goals other than full school desegregation commanded support among African Americans, while reaffirming popular support for it once *Brown* made school desegregation the law of the land.

Greater Than Equal focuses on the middle decades of the twentieth century, when black education in North Carolina expanded significantly and drew support from white political leaders. The growth and development of black schools reflected the importance African Americans attached to education and to schools as sources of community pride, personal advancement, and, most significantly, the rights of first-class citizenship. As the segregationist system hardened in the early twentieth century, political rights and civic equality, the typical markers of citizenship, were out of reach for most African Americans. With these avenues toward citizenship blocked, African Americans “looked to public education as their way back to the civic foundations of American life” (p. 8). But any hope of achieving such a goal required vast improvements to the quality of black schooling: more and better school buildings, better-trained teachers, broader curricula, and equitable funding. These gains could only be won with the support of white leaders who saw increased funding for black schools as a means of defusing black agitation and containing demands for full citizenship. The equalization campaigns undertaken by black communities throughout North Carolina starting in the 1920s and continuing through the 1950s testify to the deep faith many placed in education as the key to citizenship. Yet their gains, while real, were limited and served to expose “the inherent limitations of any fight for equality in a deeply segregated society” (p. 2).

Equalization efforts in North Carolina gained momentum in the years after World War I. Black leaders initially focused on redressing the inadequate number and poor quality of schools serving black children. The situation was especially grim in rural areas, where run-down, one-room schools impeded instruction and distracted students. In response, black leaders cultivated ties with state officials who proved willing to support African American schools out of a sense of paternalistic duty as...

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Tracy E. K'Meyer. *From Brown to Meredit: The Long Struggle for School Desegregation in Louisville, Kentucky, 1954–2007.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013. xii + 221 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95.

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