

From Jonathan Kozol's *Savage Inequalities*

Excerpt 1: pp. 23-25

The problems of the streets in urban areas, as teachers often note, frequently spill over into public schools. In the public schools of East St. Louis this is literally the case.

"Martin Luther King Junior High School," notes the *Post-Dispatch* in a story published in the early spring of 1989, "was evacuated Friday afternoon after sewage flowed into the kitchen. . . . The kitchen was closed and students were sent home." On Monday, the paper continues, "East St. Louis Senior High School was awash in sewage for the second time this year." The school had to be shut because of "fumes and backed-up toilets." Sewage flowed into the basement, through the floor, then up into the kitchen and the students' bathrooms. The backup, we read, "occurred in the food preparation areas."

School is resumed the following morning at the high school, but a few days later the overflow recurs. This time the entire system is affected, since the meals distributed to every student in the city are prepared in the two schools that have been flooded. School is called off for all 16,500 students in the district. The sewage backup, caused by the failure of two pumping stations, forces officials at the high school to shut down the furnaces.

At Martin Luther King, the parking lot and gym are also

flooded. "It's a disaster," says a legislator. "The streets are underwater; gaseous fumes are being emitted from the pipes under the schools," she says, "making people ill."

In the same week, the schools announce the layoff of 280 teachers, 166 cooks and cafeteria workers, 25 teacher aides, 16 custodians and 18 painters, electricians, engineers and plumbers. The president of the teachers' union says the cuts, which will bring the size of kindergarten and primary classes up to 30 students, and the size of fourth to twelfth grade classes up to 35, will have "an unimaginable impact" on the students. "If you have a high school teacher with five classes each day and between 150 and 175 students . . . , it's going to have a devastating effect." The school system, it is also noted, has been using more than 70 "permanent substitute teachers," who are paid only \$10,000 yearly, as a way of saving money.

Governor Thompson, however, tells the press that he will not pour money into East St. Louis to solve long-term problems. East St. Louis residents, he says, must help themselves. "There is money in the community," the governor insists. "It's just not being spent for what it should be spent for."

The governor, while acknowledging that East St. Louis faces economic problems, nonetheless refers dismissively to those who live in East St. Louis. "What in the community," he asks, "is being done right?" He takes the opportunity of a visit to the area to announce a fiscal grant for sewer improvement to a relatively wealthy town nearby.

In East St. Louis, meanwhile, teachers are running out of chalk and paper, and their paychecks are arriving two weeks late. The city warns its teachers to expect a cut of half their pay until the fiscal crisis has been eased.

The threatened teacher layoffs are mandated by the Illinois Board of Education, which, because of the city's fiscal crisis, has been given supervisory control of the school budget. Two weeks later the state superintendent partially relents. In a tone very different from that of the governor, he notes that East St. Louis does not have the means to solve its education problems on its own. "There is no natural way," he says, that "East St. Louis can bring itself out of this situa-

tion." Several cuts will be required in any case—one quarter of the system's teachers, 75 teacher aides, and several dozen others will be given notice—but, the state board notes, sports and music programs will not be affected.

East St. Louis, says the chairman of the state board, "is simply the worst possible place I can imagine to have a child brought up. . . . The community is in desperate circumstances." Sports and music, he observes, are, for many children here, "the only avenues of success." Sadly enough, no matter how it ratifies the stereotype, this is the truth; and there is a poignant aspect to the fact that, even with class size soaring and one quarter of the system's teachers being given their dismissal, the state board of education demonstrates its genuine but skewed compassion by attempting to leave sports and music untouched by the overall austerity.

Even sports facilities, however, are degrading by comparison with those found and expected at most high schools in America. The football field at East St. Louis High is missing almost everything—including goalposts. There are a couple of metal pipes—no crossbar, just the pipes. Bob Shannon, the football coach, who has to use his personal funds to purchase footballs and has had to cut and rake the football field himself, has dreams of having goalposts someday. He'd also like to let his students have new uniforms. The ones they wear are nine years old and held together somehow by a patchwork of repairs. Keeping them clean is a problem, too. The school cannot afford a washing machine. The uniforms are carted to a corner laundromat with fifteen dollars' worth of quarters.

Other football teams that come to play, according to the coach, are shocked to see the field and locker rooms. They want to play without a halftime break and get away. The coach reports that he's been missing paychecks, but he's trying nonetheless to raise some money to help out a member of the team whose mother has just died of cancer.

"The days of the tight money have arrived," he says. "It don't look like Moses will be coming to this school."

Excerpt 2: pp. 30-32

A girl in a white jersey with the message DO THE RIGHT THING on the front raises her hand. "You visit other schools," she says. "Do you think the children in this school are getting what we'd get in a nice section of St. Louis?"

I note that we are in a different state and city.

"Are we citizens of East St. Louis or America?" she asks.

A tall girl named Samantha interrupts. "I have a comment that I want to make." She then relates the following incident: "Fairview Heights is a mainly white community. A friend of mine and I went up there once to buy some books. We walked into the store. Everybody lookin' at us, you know,

and somebody says, 'What do you want?' And lookin' at each other like, 'What are these black girls doin' here in Fairview Heights?' I just said, 'I want to buy a book!' It's like they're scared we're goin' to rob them. Take away a privilege that's theirs by rights. Well, that goes for school as well.

"My mother wanted me to go to school there and she tried to have me transferred. It didn't work. The reason, she was told, is that we're in a different 'jurisdiction.' If you don't live up there in the hills, or further back, you can't attend their schools. That, at least, is what they told my mother."

"Is that a matter of race?" I ask. "Or money?"

"Well," she says, choosing her words with care, "the two things, race and money, go so close together—what's the difference? I live here, they live there, and they don't want me in their school."

A boy named Luther speaks about the chemical pollution. "It's like this," he says. "On one side of us you have two chemical corporations. One is Pfizer—that's out there. They make paint and pigments. The other is Monsanto. On the other side are companies incinerating toxic waste. So the trash is comin' at us this direction. The chemicals is comin' from the other. We right in the middle."

Despite these feelings, many of the children voice a curiously resilient faith in racial integration. "If the government would put a huge amount of money into East St. Louis, so that this could be a modern, well-equipped and top-rate school," I ask, "with everything that you could ever want for education, would you say that racial segregation was no longer of importance?"

Without exception, the children answer, "No."

"Going to a school with all the races," Luther says, "is more important than a modern school."

"They still believe in that dream," their teacher says. "They have no reason to do so. That is what I find so wonderful and . . . ah, so moving. . . . These kids are the only reason I get up each day."

I ask the students, "What would happen if the government decided that the students in a nearby town like Fairview Heights and the students here in East St. Louis had to go to school together next September?"

Samantha: "The buses going to Fairview Heights would all be full. The buses coming to East St. Louis would be empty."

"What if East St. Louis had the very best computer classes in the state—and if there were no computer classes in the school of Fairview Heights?"

"The buses coming here," she says, "would still be empty."

When I ask her why, she answers in these quiet words: "I don't know why."

Excerpt 3: pp. 52-54

One of these teachers comes in usually around nine-thirty. You ask her how she can expect the kids to care about their education if the teacher doesn't even come until nine-thirty. She answers you, 'It makes no difference. Kids like these aren't going anywhere.' The school board thinks it's saving money on the subs. I tell them, 'Pay now or pay later.' "

But even substitute teachers in Chicago are quite frequently in short supply. On an average morning in Chicago, 5,700 children in 190 classrooms come to school to find they have no teacher. The number of children who have no teachers on a given morning in Chicago's public schools is nearly twice the student population of New Trier High School in nearby Winnetka.

"We have been in this class a whole semester," says a 15-year-old at Du Sable High, one of Chicago's poorest secondary schools, "and they still can't find us a teacher."

A student in auto mechanics at Du Sable says he'd been in class for 16 weeks before he learned to change a tire. His first teacher quit at the beginning of the year. Another teacher slept through most of the semester. He would come in, the student says, and tell the students, "You can talk. Just keep it down." Soon he would be asleep.

"Let's be real," the student says. "Most of us ain't going to college. . . . We could have used a class like this."

The shortage of teachers finds its parallel in a shortage of supplies. A chemistry teacher at the school reports that he does not have beakers, water, bunsen burners. He uses a popcorn popper as a substitute for a bunsen burner, and he cuts down plastic soda bottles to make laboratory dishes.

Many of these schools make little effort to instruct their failing students. "If a kid comes in not reading," says an English teacher at Chicago's South Shore High, "he goes out not reading."

Another teacher at the school, where only 170 of 800 freshmen graduate with their class, indicates that the dropout rate makes teaching easier. "We lose all the dregs by the second year," he says.

"We're a general high school," says the head of counseling at Chicago's Calumet High School. "We have second- and

third-grade readers. . . . We hope to do better, but we won't die if we don't."

At Bowen High School, on the South Side of Chicago, students have two or three "study halls" a day, in part to save the cost of teachers. "Not much studying goes on in study hall," a supervising teacher says. "I let the students play cards. . . . I figure they might get some math skills out of it."

At the Lathrop Elementary School, a short walk from the corner lot where Dr. King resided in North Lawndale, there are no hoops on the basketball court and no swings in the playground. For 21 years, according to the *Chicago Tribune*, the school has been without a library. Library books, which have been piled and abandoned in the lunch room of the school, have "sprouted mold," the paper says. Some years ago the school received the standard reading textbooks out of sequence: The second workbook in the reading program came to the school before the first. The principal, uncertain what to do with the wrong workbook, was told by school officials it was "all right to work backwards. . . ."

This degree of equanimity in failure, critics note, has led most affluent parents in Chicago to avoid the public system altogether. The school board president in 1989, although a teacher and administrator in the system for three decades, did not send his children to the public schools. Nor does Mayor Richard Daley, Jr., nor did any of the previous four mayors who had school-age children.

"Nobody in his right mind," says one of the city's aldermen, "would send [his] kids to public school."

Many suburban legislators representing affluent school districts use terms such as "sinkhole" when opposing funding for Chicago's children. "We can't keep throwing money," said Governor Thompson in 1988, "into a black hole."

The *Chicago Tribune* notes that, when this phrase is used, people hasten to explain that it is not intended as a slur against the race of many of Chicago's children. "But race," says the *Tribune*, "never is far from the surface. . . ."

As spring comes to Chicago, the scarcity of substitutes grows more acute. On Mondays and Fridays in early May, nearly 18,000 children—the equivalent of all the elementary

students in suburban Glencoe, Wilmette, Glenview, Kenilworth, Winnetka, Deerfield, Highland Park and Evanston—are assigned to classes with no teacher.

In this respect, the city's dropout rate of nearly 50 percent is regarded by some people as a blessing. If over 200,000 of Chicago's total student population of 440,000 did not disappear during their secondary years, it is not clear who would teach them.

In 1989, Chicago spent some \$5,500 for each student in its secondary schools. This may be compared to an investment of some \$8,500 to \$9,000 in each high school student in the highest-spending suburbs to the north. Stated in the simplest terms, this means that any high school class of 30 children in Chicago received approximately \$90,000 less each year than would have been spent on them if they were pupils of a school such as New Trier High.

— The difference in spending between very wealthy suburbs and poor cities is not always as extreme as this in Illinois. When relative student needs, however, have been factored into the discussion, the disparities in funding are enormous. Equity, after all, does not mean simply equal funding. Equal funding for unequal needs is not equality. The need is greater in Chicago, and its children, if they are to have approximately equal opportunities, need more than the children who attend New Trier. Seen in this light, the \$90,000 annual difference is quite startling.

Lack of money is not the only problem in Chicago, but the gulf in funding we have seen is so remarkable and seems so blatantly unfair that it strikes many thoughtful citizens at first as inexplicable. How can it be that inequalities as great as these exist in neighboring school districts?

The answer is found, at least in part, in the arcane machinery by which we finance public education. Most public schools in the United States depend for their initial funding on a tax on local property. There are also state and federal funding sources, and we will discuss them later, but the property tax is the decisive force in shaping inequality. The property tax depends, of course, upon the taxable value of one's home and that of local industries. A typical wealthy suburb in which homes are often worth more than \$400,000

draws upon a larger tax base in proportion to its student population than a city occupied by thousands of poor people. Typically, in the United States, very poor communities place high priority on education, and they often tax themselves at higher rates than do the very affluent communities. But, even if they tax themselves at several times the rate of an extremely wealthy district, they are likely to end up with far less money for each child in their schools.

Because the property tax is counted as a tax deduction by the federal government, home-owners in a wealthy suburb get back a substantial portion of the money that they spend to fund their children's schools—effectively, a federal subsidy for an unequal education. Home-owners in poor districts get this subsidy as well, but, because their total tax is less, the subsidy is less. The mortgage interest that home-owners pay is also treated as a tax deduction—in effect, a second federal subsidy. These subsidies, as I have termed them, are considerably larger than most people understand. In 1984, for instance, property-tax deductions granted by the federal government were \$9 billion. An additional \$23 billion in mortgage-interest deductions were provided to home-owners: a total of some \$32 billion. Federal grants to local schools, in contrast, totaled only \$7 billion, and only part of this was earmarked for low-income districts. Federal policy, in this respect, increases the existing gulf between the richest and the poorest schools.

Excerpt 4: pp. 60-61

Children who have had the benefits of preschool and one of the better elementary schools are at a great advantage in achieving entrance to selective high schools; but an even more important factor seems to be the social class and education level of their parents. This is the case because the system rests on the initiative of parents. The poorest parents, often the products of inferior education, lack the information access and the skills of navigation in an often hostile and intimidating situation to channel their children to the better schools, obtain the applications, and (perhaps a little more important) help them to get ready for the necessary tests and then persuade their elementary schools to recommend them. So, even in poor black neighborhoods, it tends to be children of the less poor and the better educated who are likely to break through the obstacles and win admission.

The system has the surface aspects of a meritocracy, but merit in this case is predetermined by conditions that are closely tied to class and race. While some defend it as, in theory, "the survival of the fittest," it is more accurate to call it the survival of the children of the fittest—or of the most favored. Similar systems exist in every major city. They are defended stoutly by those who succeed in getting into the selective schools.

The parallel system extends to elementary schools as well. A recent conflict around one such school illustrates the way the system pits the middle class against the poor. A mostly middle-income condominium development was built close to a public housing project known as Hilliard Homes. The new development, called Dearborn Park, attracted a number of young professionals, many of whom were fairly affluent white people, who asked the school board to erect a new school for their children. This request was honored and the South Loop Elementary School was soon constructed. At this point a bitter struggle ensued. The question: Who would get to go to the new school?

The parents from Dearborn Park insist that, if the

school is attended by the children from the projects—these are the children who have lived there all along—the standards of the school will fall. The school, moreover, has a special "fine arts" magnet program; middle-class children, drawn to the school from other sections of Chicago, are admitted. So the effort to keep out the kids who live right in the neighborhood points up the class and racial factors. The city, it is noted, had refused to build a new school for the project children when they were the only children in the neighborhood. Now that a new school has been built, they find themselves excluded.

The Dearborn parents have the political power to obtain agreement from the Board of Education to enter their children beginning in kindergarten but to keep the Hilliard children out until third grade—by which time, of course, the larger numbers of these poorer children will be at a disadvantage and will find it hard to keep up with the children who were there since kindergarten. In the interim, according to the *New York Times*, the younger children from the project are obliged to go to class within “a temporary branch school” in “a small, prefabricated metal building surrounded on three sides by junkyards.”

The Chicago Panel on Public School Policy and Finance tells the press that it “is only fair” to let the kids from Hilliard Homes share in the resources “that the middle-class kids enjoy.” The panel also notes that poorer children do not tend to bring the top kids down. “It is more likely that the high-achieving kids will bring the others up.” But the truth is that few middle-class parents in Chicago, or in any other city, honestly believe this. They see the poorer children as a tide of mediocrity that threatens to engulf them. They are prepared to see those children get their schooling in a metal prefab in a junkyard rather than admit them to the beautiful new school erected for their own kids.

Excerpt 5: pp. 125-128

The principal, a relaxed, unhurried man who, unlike many urban principals, seems gratified to have me visit in his school, takes me in to see the auditorium, which, he says, was recently restored with private charitable funds (\$400,000) raised by parents. The crenellated ceiling, which is white and spotless, and the polished dark-wood paneling contrast with the collapsing structure of the auditorium at Morris High. The principal strikes his fist against the balcony: “They made this place extremely solid.” Through a window, one can see the spreading branches of a beech tree in the central courtyard of the school.

In a student lounge, a dozen seniors are relaxing on a carpeted floor that is constructed with a number of tiers so that, as the principal explains, “they can stretch out and be comfortable while reading.”

The library is wood-paneled, like the auditorium. Students, all of whom are white, are seated at private carrels, of which there are approximately 40. Some are doing homework; others are looking through the *New York Times*. Every student that I see during my visit to the school is white or Asian, though I later learn there are a number of Hispanic students and that 1 or 2 percent of students in the school are black.

According to the principal, the school has 96 computers for 546 children. The typical student, he says, studies a foreign language for four or five years, beginning in the junior high school, and a second foreign language (Latin is available) for two years. Of 140 seniors, 92 are now enrolled in AP classes. Maximum teacher salary will soon reach \$70,000. Per-pupil funding is above \$12,000 at the time I visit.

The students I meet include eleventh and twelfth graders. The teacher tells me that the class is reading Robert Coles, Studs Terkel, Alice Walker. He tells me I will find them more than willing to engage me in debate, and this turns out to be correct. Primed for my visit, it appears, they arrow in directly on the dual questions of equality and race.

Three general positions soon emerge and seem to be

accepted widely. The first is that the fiscal inequalities "do matter very much" in shaping what a school can offer ("That is obvious," one student says) and that any loss of funds in Rye, as a potential consequence of future equalizing, would be damaging to many things the town regards as quite essential.

The second position is that racial integration—for example, by the busing of black children from the city or a nonwhite suburb to this school—would meet with strong resistance, and the reason would not simply be the fear that certain standards might decline. The reason, several students say straightforwardly, is "racial" or, as others say it, "out-and-out racism" on the part of adults.

The third position voiced by many students, but not all, is that equity is basically a goal to be desired and should be pursued for moral reasons, but "will probably make no major difference" since poor children "still would lack the motivation" and "would probably fail in any case because of other problems."

At this point, I ask if they can truly say "it wouldn't make a difference" since it's never been attempted. Several students then seem to rethink their views and say that "it might work, but it would have to start with preschool and the elementary grades" and "it might be 20 years before we'd see a difference."

At this stage in the discussion, several students speak with some real feeling of the present inequalities, which, they say, are "obviously unfair," and one student goes a little further and proposes that "we need to change a lot more than the schools." Another says she'd favor racial integration "by whatever means—including busing—even if my parents disapprove." But a contradictory opinion also is expressed with a good deal of fervor and is stated by one student in a rather biting voice: "I don't see why we should do it. How could it be of benefit to us?"

Throughout the discussion, whatever the views the children voice, there is a degree of unreality about the whole exchange. The children are lucid and their language is well chosen and their arguments well made, but there is a sense that they are dealing with an issue that does not feel very vivid, and that nothing that we say about it to each other

really matters since it's "just a theoretical discussion." To a certain degree, the skillfulness and cleverness that they display seem to derive precisely from this sense of unreality. Questions of unfairness feel more like a geometric problem than a matter of humanity or conscience. A few of the students do break through the note of unreality, but, when they do, they cease to be so agile in their use of words and speak more awkwardly. Ethical challenges seem to threaten their

effectiveness. There is the sense that they were skating over ice and that the issues we addressed were safely frozen underneath. When they stop to look beneath the ice they start to stumble. The verbal competence they have acquired here may have been gained by building walls around some regions of the heart.

"I don't think that busing students from their ghetto to a different school would do much good," one student says. "You can take them out of the environment, but you can't take the environment out of *them*. If someone grows up in the South Bronx, he's not going to be prone to learn." His name is Max and he has short black hair and speaks with confidence. "Busing didn't work when it was tried," he says. I ask him how he knows this and he says he saw a television movie about Boston.

"I agree that it's unfair the way it is," another student says. "We have AP courses and they don't. Our classes are much smaller." But, she says, "putting them in schools like ours is not the answer. Why not put some AP classes into *their* school? Fix the roof and paint the halls so it will not be so depressing."

The students know the term "separate but equal," but seem unaware of its historical associations. "Keep them where they are but make it equal," says a girl in the front row.

A student named Jennifer, whose manner of speech is somewhat less refined and polished than that of the others, tells me that her parents came here from New York. "My family is originally from the Bronx. Schools are hell there. That's one reason that we moved. I don't think it's our responsibility to pay our taxes to provide for *them*. I mean, my parents used to live there and they wanted to get out. There's

no point in coming to a place like this, where schools are good, and then your taxes go back to the place where you began."

I bait her a bit: "Do you mean that, now that you are not in hell, you have no feeling for the people that you left behind?"

"It has to be the people in the area who want an education. If your parents just don't care, it won't do any good to spend a lot of money. Someone else can't want a good life for you. You have got to want it for yourself." Then she adds, however, "I agree that everyone should have a chance at taking the same courses. . . ."

I ask her if she'd think it fair to pay more taxes so that this was possible.

"I don't see how that benefits me," she says.