

MLK Essay
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The Declaration of Independence stirringly proclaims, “All men are created equal,” yet the Founders’ dreams of an egalitarian society are mocked by today’s public education system. *Brown v. Board of Education* ringingly declared that, “...In the field of public education, the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place.” However, the inequalities today are an affront to that decades-old ruling.

Our schools are systematically failing millions of children, condemning them to bleak futures because of race and class. The squandered potential is incalculable; the cost to society defies imagination. It is incomprehensible and unconscionable that in a land of unrivaled abundance children must learn in dilapidated classrooms lacking running water, air conditioning, and clean bathrooms. Moreover, people like to think that segregation is a vestige of the past, but it is still pervasive: over 90% of these students are African-American or Hispanic. Ultimately, public education reform is an issue that must be tackled because the status quo is immoral, ridiculing equality, justice, and the pursuit of happiness for all.

Happily, education reform has been brought to the forefront of the national conversation by Davis Guggenheim’s impassioned documentary, “Waiting for Superman,” and the media’s in-depth coverage. John Legend has penned a contemporary freedom song, “Shine,” calling for immediate, profound change in our schools. Whereas many callous, wrongheaded observers stereotype our public schools’ victims as lazy, uncaring, or worthless, Legend humanizes them, declaring, “I love to see their face,” discussing their “beautiful minds” and the “sparks,” “light,” and “little miracles” within, waiting to be drawn out by compassion and a true guide. He identifies the soul-crushing anonymity these students experience when he says, “They sing out when we’re not listening/’Cause we don’t see their face” and demands that we “let ‘em speak their name.” Additionally, he exposes the public’s aversion to these innocents, asking, “Are we afraid to see them, prisoners of history?” Finally, he encapsulates the struggle we face by stating that they “can’t read if we don’t teach ‘em” and by giving us a stark dichotomy—we can either “let them die,” extinguishing their hopes, dreams, and potential, or we can “Make the high,” raising them up to a fulfilling education and life.

Legend sings with hope, directing us toward solutions to the crisis that we face, pointing out that “ordinary people could be a hero.” Affluent students can run book and school supply drives and hold bake sales for less fortunate students. Students with the aptitude and inclination to volunteer their time can tutor kids who are struggling. All students can discuss education reform with their friends and family, sign petitions, hold rallies, and lobby teachers’ unions and the government to work for equitable reform.

Ultimately, it comes down to a principle taught in kindergarten: fairness. While education reform will not be as simple as a kindergarten lesson, if students, parents, and teachers take action to effect change, one day, all will, in Legend’s words, be free to “shine on,” and the light of knowledge will illuminate the world.