HISTORICAL STUDIES IN EDUCATION

Edited by William J. Reese and John L. Rury

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Policy Implementation, Politics, and
Protest, 1965–1985

Dionne Danns

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DESEGREGATING CHICAGO'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 2014 978-1-137-36091-5

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First published in 2014 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN®

in the United States—a division of St. Martin's Press LLC,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978-1-349-47210-9 ISBN 978-1-137-35758-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1057/9781137357588

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Danns, Dionne.

Desegregating Chicago's public schools : policy implementation,
politics, and protest, 1965–1985 / Dionne Danns.

pages cm.—(Historical studies in education)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. School integration—Illinois—Chicago—History—20th century.

2. Public schools—Illinois—Chicago—History—20th century. I. Title.

LC214.23.C54D36 2013

379.2'630977311—dc23

2013028961

A catalogue record of the book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Knowledge Works (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: January 2014

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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SERIES FOREWORD

In the annals of school desegregation in American history, surprisingly little attention has been given to Chicago, long recognized as one of the country's most segregated cities. This is partly because its public schools were never subject to the wrenching legal battles and court-ordered integration plans that many other urban districts experienced. Studies about why desegregation cases *didn't* happen, after all, hardly seem as compelling as those that describe the many dramatic encounters that characterized cities where legal decisions had an immediate impact on the daily lives of students, parents, and educators. In this illuminating book, however, Dionne Danns demonstrates how legal inaction can be just as revealing of the social and political forces that historically constrained equity in urban schools.

In certain respects, it is rather surprising that a major desegregation court decision was never rendered in Chicago; it was the only major city in the Great Lakes region to avoid one. As Danns clearly documents, this was largely a function of the city's importance in state and national politics, and the power wielded by its legendary mayor of the postwar era, Richard J. Daley. There certainly was no shortage of local controversy over school segregation and related questions of equity in education during this period. Activists in Chicago were national leaders in identifying the manifold ways in which racial inequality could persist in a school system that claimed to be evenhanded and "colorblind." Yet the Daley regime successfully resisted efforts by protestors and by both state and federal authorities to compel the school system to seriously expand upon limited voluntary desegregation measures.

As Danns's research shows, this situation would last well beyond the period of Daley's immediate influence. By the time of his death in 1976, the politics of desegregation had shifted dramatically, both at the national and local levels. This meant that efforts to achieve meaningful desegregation were continually stymied by a constellation of factors and circumstances, despite ample documentation of inequity and discrimination in the provision of school resources and

ongoing avoidance of racial integration. As Danns notes in her conclusion, a “shifting federal agenda, local political power, stakeholder opposition and demographic transitions” combined to make school desegregation a highly elusive goal in the Windy City. Based on solid research and delivered in straightforward prose, her instructive study breaks new ground in Chicago history and historical examinations of northern school integration. We are pleased to include it in the series, and expect that other readers will find it as enlightening as we have.

WILLIAM J. REESE
and
JOHN L. RURY

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful to so many people who have made this book possible. I would first like to thank my colleagues at Indiana University for providing a supportive environment, which has helped me to grow as a scholar. Andrea Walton, Barry Bull, and Edward McClellan provided insight on individual chapters. I would especially like to thank my mentor, Donald Warren, for reading an entire draft of the book. Don has continually been supportive of my work and has been far more of a mentor than I could have expected. Other colleagues at IU and elsewhere also provided valuable feedback. Thanks to Valerie Grim, Khalil Muhammad, Christopher Span, Michelle Purdy, and Timothy Lovelace. Special thanks to V. P. Franklin and Derrick Aldridge who guided me through the early drafts of the book. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewer at Palgrave.

This project was partially supported by Indiana University's New Frontiers Program, funded by Lilly Endowment and administered by the Office of the Vice Provost for Research. A number of current and former students also assisted me with this project. I am grateful to Mahauganee Shaw, Lyndsay Spear, Juan Berumen, Jacob Hardesty, Daniel Dethrow, and Megan Houlihan for research assistance. Alexis Saba had the great joy of transcribing interviews. They were each indispensable early on in this project. Daniel Dethrow also provided valuable editing for the book. Hope Rias, Yesenia Cervera, Carolyn Weber, and Alli Fetter-Harrott also took the time to provide great feedback for some of my chapters.

I visited a number of archives to complete this research. I would like to thank the archivists and staff at the Chicago Board of Education Archives, Harold Washington Library, the National Archives (College Park and the regional Chicago site), Indiana University Library, the Chicago History Museum, Special Collections at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Three people were especially helpful: at the Indiana University Library, Lou Malcolm found a way for me to receive more microfilm additions of the *Chicago Sun-Times* through interlibrary loan; Theresa Quill

created the maps for the book; and Richard Seidel at the Chicago Board of Education Archives was the most helpful, friendly, and supportive archivist I have had the pleasure to meet. He will be missed.

My family has shown me unconditional love and support throughout this project. Danda and Melissa Thomas provided me with hospitality (BTT), as I completed research at the National Archives. Some family members have been so supportive that they have been put to work. My aunt, Joan Elcock, read chapters and provided editorial feedback. My mother, Ann Danns, read the entire manuscript, provided editorial assistance, and served as a sounding board as the project developed. My father, George (Ken) Danns, read the manuscript several times while teaching numerous classes. His guidance was essential in developing the larger arguments for this book. I could not have done this without my parents. My daughter, Najerie, gave up her time with me so that I could complete various drafts of this book. Her sacrifices did not go unnoticed. She also provided valuable editing for the final draft of the book. This book is dedicated to my mother and father, my daughter Najerie, and my sister Tamara Bramlett.

Portions of this book were previously published in articles including “Northern Desegregation: A Tale of Two Cities,” *History of Education Quarterly* 51 (1) (2011); “Chicago School Desegregation and the Role of the State of Illinois, 1971–1979,” *American Educational History Journal* 37 (1) (2010): 55–73; and “Racial Ideology and the Sanctity of the Neighborhood School Policy in Chicago,” *Urban Review* 40 (1) (2008): 64–75.