

# Preface

This project began with an old-fashioned letter to my daughter, written in borrowed moments just before the 2016 election. I'd been asked to speak at an annual series of lectures on the state of metropolitan Richmond, Virginia. My topic was education. The event was hosted by St. Paul's Church, a faith community established in 1845 whose initial intertwinement with the Confederacy later gave way to a ministry focused on social justice and racial reconciliation.

In my search for the most effective way to communicate about the critical importance of school integration—effectiveness measured, in my mind, by changes both in individual behavior and in broader policy—I'd landed on the idea of reading to the gathered crowd a letter to my daughter, Posey. She'd just started preschool. It would be about what our family wanted for her education, and what we'd inherited from our history here in Richmond.

Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* had been published the year before, written as a letter to his teenage son, and I was in the middle of revisiting James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, which contains a letter to his nephew, as I sat down to write. As further inspiration, Nikole Hannah-Jones had recently authored a topical article for the *New York Times Magazine* called, "Choosing a School for My Daughter in a Segregated City." What, I wondered, would a letter sound like from my perspective? That of a white parent trying to map out an equity-minded approach to her kid's schooling along a path littered with historical and contemporary inequality? (It should go without saying that my efforts fall woefully short of Coates's, Baldwin's, or Hannah-Jones's work.)

The letter, which opens this book, details the many ways in which deliberate segregation by race continues to shape educational opportunity in Richmond—and in the country writ large. But the notes of hope

contained within it were the catalyst for an intensive research study. At St. Paul's, I'd spoken of two local schools purposefully working to nurture diversity in the midst of wide and deep systems of segregation. I wanted to know more about how and why these efforts had come about. What could families, educators, policy makers, and scholars interested in racial justice and the benefits of integration learn from them? Were there other local examples? And were they working?

To answer these questions, among others, from 2017 to 2019 I worked as a researcher deeply immersed in those two racially and economically integrating schools, along with two others, in Richmond. I interviewed over seventy diverse stakeholders, observed classrooms, and attended orientations, field trips, awards ceremonies, and teacher professional development days.

I want to be clear about my involvement with the four schools explored in this book: the Sprout School at the Children's Museum, Ecoff Elementary School, Binford Middle School, and CodeRVA Regional High School. I selected them for their intentional work around racial and economic school integration, which in many ways is paying off. I also chose the schools for the rich variation in grade level and urban, suburban, and regional locale they provided. In most cases, I had a sense of their variation and intentionality from personal experience. My daughter, Posey, has gone to preschool at Sprout since it opened its doors. I'd encountered the principal of Ecoff Elementary several times at community events, in part because of his knowledge of local school desegregation history. I went to Binford Middle as a child, and the current principal was an early student of mine at Virginia Commonwealth University. I've served as a member of the advisory board for CodeRVA Regional High School (though I did not attend meetings during active fieldwork). In short, my life as a researcher, teacher, student, and mother had been bound up for some time in the lives of these schools.

There are strengths and weaknesses to these myriad levels of involvement, of course. On the one hand, prior relationships with school leaders meant access and established trust—crucial assets for any intensive qualitative study, especially one centered on race. But on the other hand, they raise questions about dual or multiple roles and po-

tential objectivity. I dealt with these tensions partly by making it clear which hat I was wearing when (e.g., my mom hat at a Sprout family event versus my researcher hat). To protect participants in the research process, I changed or masked the names of most interviewees, with the exception of public-facing figures like community, district, or school leaders. In terms of objectivity, I benefited from the superior research assistance of Virginia Palencia, who helped transcribe and reflect upon interviews and site visits. She entered graduate school as a newcomer to the Richmond area, with no prior contacts at the four schools. We shaped our notes and thoughts on the schools independently before reviewing them together. Her outside perspective acted as either validation or invalidation of my more involved one. As a further safeguard, leaders affiliated with all four schools read through relevant chapters and offered feedback and commentary.

Make no mistake, though. This book is written by someone who believes intensely in the value of school integration, a perspective shaped by numerous personal and professional experiences with it. Yet those same experiences have also taught me how hard and continuously we have to work to achieve integration in a tremendously segregated society, which is why you'll encounter stories of struggle alongside stories of success as you read.

I wouldn't have a story to tell at all without the leadership associated with our four Richmond area schools. A most heartfelt thanks goes to this group, whose openness and commitment to the research project remained unwavering. Many others supported the work as it evolved. A special note of gratitude to my editor Nancy Walser, whose wise guidance and gentle guard against my tendency to spin an overly long tale made this book much stronger. Research leave and support provided by Virginia Commonwealth University gave me the time and resources needed to complete the project. In addition to Virginia Palencia, three student assistants, Najia Lindh, Sarah Haden, and Ash Taylor-Beierl, gave me very helpful assistance with editing and source documentation. Ash also read the entire draft, making critical suggestions and asking clarifying questions throughout. Erica Frankenberg, Tom Shields, Yvonne Brandon, and Kim Bridges offered invaluable

feedback along the way. Educators, students, and advocates affiliated with the National Coalition on School Diversity delivered inspiration at the outset; any proceeds from the book are dedicated to them. And, as always, my (growing) family provided sustaining love and ridiculousness on the days when I wondered if this book would ever get finished.

It did, so let's get started.