

# SCHOOL NAMES AS CULTURAL ARENAS: THE NAMING OF U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS AFTER MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract:* The commemoration of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (MLK) is a growing movement in many American cities and towns. School naming is an important yet underanalyzed part of this project. A recent struggle in Riverside, California over naming a high school for MLK is used as a springboard for: (1) conceptualizing school names as cultural arenas for debating student and community identity and (2) conducting a general study of the types of U.S. public schools named for King. As illustrated in California, school naming can be interpreted by one social group as a means of integrating and inspiring students historically and viewed by another group as a means of drawing boundaries around students in terms of race and local heritage. According to 1997–1998 data, 110 public schools bear King’s name. They are located most often in the central cities of large and mid-size urban areas. King’s name is most frequently found on schools that teach early and middle grades. Schools named for Martin Luther King do not necessarily denote a “Black” school in terms of the racial characteristics of students, although they do not fully integrate Whites with African Americans or Whites with minorities in general. Naming schools for King is part of a larger refashioning of the urban cultural landscape as racial and ethnic groups increasingly seek public recognition of their historical achievements. [Key words: Martin Luther King Jr., school name, cultural arena, public commemoration, race.]

In 1998, members of the Riverside (California) Unified School Board voted unanimously to name a new high school after slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK). Naming the school, which opened in September 1999, captured national media attention and sparked vehement protests from many parents. Some parents feared that the school (expected to be two-thirds White) might be perceived as being a predominantly “Black” school, thus hurting their children’s chances of getting into good colleges. Ironically, they cited intolerance and racism in other regions of the United States as justification for not naming the school for King. As one critic was quoted as saying: “In some parts of the country, [King is] not looked upon as somebody famous” (Acosta, 1998a, p. B1). During a two-hour public debate, citizens of Riverside interpreted and represented the boundaries of Martin Luther King’s legacy in dramatically different ways. Opposing parents saw little connection (and, in fact, feared the creation of one) in identifying stu-

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dents from White, middle-class neighborhoods with an African American historical figure. Meanwhile, school board members emphasized the universal, cross-racial importance of the civil rights leader. For example, school board president Lewis Vanderzyl stated: "Whether he [King] was Black, White, green, or red, the things for which he worked so hard are things that all Americans can stand to consider" (quoted in *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 5, 1998, News section, p. 21). Another board member argued that the commemoration of King "transcends the issue of race" (quoted in Gorman, 1998, p. A3). Although envisioned as a means of integration, the school naming process exposed racial divisions within the community and significant variations in the extent to which people identify with King and wish to be associated with his memory.

The commemoration of Martin Luther King is a growing movement in many American cities and towns. Although memorializing King began almost immediately after his assassination in 1968, he rose to the status of official hero or commemorative icon when the federal government designated his birthday a holiday in 1983. In addition to hosting holiday-related activities, communities also honor the civil rights leader through the building of museums and memorials (Gallagher, 1996; Dwyer, 2000). Embedding King's memory in physical space is a powerful form of commemoration, rivaling the holiday in terms of what it can teach us about how Americans remember and interpret his life and legacy (Rhea, 1997). Place naming is an important and under-analyzed component in the larger geography of memorializing Martin Luther King. Place names perhaps lack what Armada (1998) called the "rhetorical" power of museums, monuments, and memorials. However, named places "merge the past they commemorate into ordinary settings of human life" (Azarayahu, 1997, p. 481). Indeed, King's name has been inscribed into streets, schools, hospitals, parks, bridges, libraries, recreation centers, and numerous other public places in the United States.<sup>3</sup> Streets and schools are the public texts most frequently used in remembering him. Roger Stump (1988, p. 215), who is responsible for the earliest study of this phenomenon, clearly established the analytical value of studying places named for MLK.

The places named for ...King thus represent more than simple memorials. They are public symbols of community values, attitudes, and beliefs, revealing the character of both the figure commemorated and the community that has honored him. Examination of patterns in the use of such placenames therefore offer insights into significant variations within the American social landscape. Further exploration of the commemorative use of street names, school names, and similar elements of the placename cover should extend our understanding of that landscape and the people who created it.

Since the publication of Stump's study 14 years ago, few scholars have taken up his call for further research. While recent research efforts have focused on street naming (e.g.,

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<sup>3</sup>One even finds MLK landmarks in cities outside the United States. A few examples include a cultural center in Havana, Cuba, a bridge in Ougadougou, Burkina Faso, a children's hospital in Germany, a park in Tel Aviv, Israel, and a museum in Delhi, India (The King Center, 1999).

Alderman, 1996, 2000, 2002), little attention (if any) has been devoted to the attachment of King's name to schools and the cultural significance of this symbolic practice.

The events in Riverside are indicative of struggles waged in communities across the country as they debate how best to remember the civil rights leader. As Karen Till (1999, p. 254) would argue, localized territorial struggles such as seen in Riverside "often reflect larger social (and power) disputes about who has the authority to create, define, interpret and represent collective pasts through place." The collective contributions of African Americans certainly do not end or begin with King. In fact, the last two centuries have seen numerous attempts to preserve and recognize the historical experiences of Blacks (Ruffins, 1992). Arguably, however, King has become the most widely identified symbol of the civil rights movement and Black heritage in general. While public opinion polls show that many Americans—Black and White—recognize and admire MLK, they also show significant deviations in the extent to which people feel a personal identification with him and his legacy.<sup>4</sup> As evident in Riverside, people often disagree over whether King should be remembered strictly as an advocate for the African American community or as a figure relevant and historically important to everyone regardless of race. The different ways in which citizens respond to this issue provide a window to understanding how Americans imagine themselves historically and culturally. Schools named after King are battlefields in what has become popularly known as "culture wars." Culture wars, as asserted by Don Mitchell (2000, p. 5), "are battles over cultural identities—and the power to shape, determine, and literally, *emplace* those identities" (original emphasis). Schools names are important arenas for "emplacing" and debating the identities to which Mitchell refers. Despite the important cultural politics at work in Riverside and other places, the academic and lay communities lack an adequate knowledge of where school naming fits—theoretically and empirically—into the contemporary urban cultural landscape.

In this paper, I have two major objectives. The first is to develop a framework for understanding the ideological importance of school naming. School names are conceptualized as cultural arenas for debating student and community identity. The case in California illustrates how the commemoration of King can be interpreted by one group as a means of bridging social and racial differences and viewed by another as a way of reinforcing these very boundaries. School naming allows us to study boundary making outside the traditional political context of state and international borders. As Newman and Paasi (1998) found, scholars have begun to examine the social construction of boundaries at a variety of scales and dimensions. School naming, and place naming in general, represent what they called an "identity narrative," a means of drawing distinctions and boundaries between "us" and "them" and "insider" versus "outsider."

Given the small amount of empirical research that has been done on school naming, my second objective is more descriptive in nature. I conducted a general study of the types of public schools identified by name with the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr. A search of a recently published educational database found King's name attached to 110 public schools in the United States, with the frequency of named schools greatest in the

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<sup>4</sup>For instance, in a 1994 survey of 613 New York City residents, 68% responded that King's life had influenced them. While only 12% of African Americans claimed not to be influenced by King's life, the figure rose to 41% for White respondents (Marist Institute for Public Opinion, 1994).

northern and western states. MLK schools are found disproportionately in the central cities of large and mid-size urban areas. Despite the importance that race and entrance to college played in the California naming struggle, we know very little about the characteristics of MLK schools in terms of grade level and racial composition. Evidence presented in this paper suggests that the civil rights leader is most often identified with schools that teach early and middle grades. In contrast to arguments offered during the Riverside debate, schools named for King do not necessarily denote a “Black” school in terms of the racial characteristics of students, although they do not fully integrate Whites with African Americans or Whites with minorities in general.

My primary intention is to shed light on the naming of schools after MLK. At the same time, however, a critical appraisal of these schools complements a growing literature that examines the politics of public memory and analyzes how heritage and commemorative landscapes are open to competing ideas about identity, memory, and place (e.g., Bodnar, 1992; Charlesworth, 1994; Johnson, 1995; Edensor, 1997; Hoelscher, 1998; Graham et al., 2000). As Brian Ladd (1998) revealed in his analysis of Berlin, urban landscapes serve as powerful symbols and repositories of memory. More recently, Srinivas (2001, p. xxv) suggested that landscapes of urban memory “are a means of accessing how various strata of society and different communities construct the metropolitan world.” This study contributes to the literature by examining school names as powerful and contested memorial spaces within cities and towns.

As memorial spaces, names attached to schools shed light on the changing and often contentious nature of American collective memory. The commemoration of King is part of a larger campaign carried out by activists to recognize the historical achievements of not just African Americans but all minority groups. In fact, two years before Riverside became embroiled in its naming controversy, school district officials in nearby Corona-Norco Unified School District came under public fire for naming an elementary school after the late farm labor union leader Cesar Chavez (Lovekin, 1996). This rewriting of memory and space is a product of what Rhea (1997) has called the “race pride movement.” The movement is affecting not only school names but also the geography of statues, museums, preserved sites, heritage trails, and festivals. In addition to a new high school, Riverside has dedicated a street, statue, and a library collection in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. Although the race pride movement is evident across the urban cultural landscape, schools are particularly important places for studying this activism. Perhaps no other institution has debated and felt the effects of multiculturalism more than the American public school (LaBelle and Ward, 1994).

#### SCHOOL NAMES AS CULTURAL ARENAS

Schools, of course, are about educational and intellectual matters. As Claire Dwyer (1993, p. 143) argued, however, the school is also a key site in the production of culture, not only in transmitting a dominant culture to students but as a place where “cultural meanings can be resisted or contested.” Other scholars have characterized schools as *arenas*, places where individuals or groups struggle with each other over the definition of normative culture and cultural identities (Grufford, 1996; Vaughn, 1997; Bynum and Thompson, 1999). In this paper, I extend this metaphor of arena to an analysis of school naming. U.S. public schools are often embroiled in cultural debates because of the strong

institutional role they play in the socialization of students and the fact that local taxpayers claim a stake in the schools they help finance (Merrett, 1999). Race relations have often been at the center of these debates. According to Pathey-Chavez (1993), schools have traditionally been viewed as arenas for cultural assimilation, places where minorities can be integrated into the wider socio-cultural mainstream. After studying social relations in a Los Angeles high school, however, she offered a more critical conceptualization. The school is also an arena in which cultural boundaries are negotiated, “with ‘minority’ and ‘majority’ in conflict over the extent to which their versions of a cultural identity are to be reproduced in the American education system” (Pathey-Chavez, 1993, p. 33). This tension between seeing schools as arenas for integration or boundary conflicts will resurface as we discuss the politics of naming the Riverside high school for King.

Schools play an important role in shaping the collective memory and historical identity of their students and the attendant community. While accomplished directly through school curriculum development and the teaching of history per se, student conceptions of the past are also shaped indirectly through the commemorative activities and symbols woven into the everyday fabric of the school (e.g., school holidays, programs, bulletin boards). The naming of schools after historical figures is a subtle yet powerful way of communicating “the accomplishments of previous generations” and defining a set of folk heroes (Goldstein, 1978, p. 119). By merging history and the physical environment, place names and other spatial commemorations work to reify certain visions of the past, giving them legitimacy and identification with the natural order of things (Azarayahu, 1996).

Analyzing school names as arenas for representing and debating the past is consistent with what anthropologist Peter Nas (1998) has referred to as an “urban symbolic ecology” approach. This approach, which focuses on the cultural dimensions of cities, examines “the social production of symbols in the urban arena” and the “resulting distribution patterns and underlying mechanisms” associated with these symbols (Nas, 1998, p. 546). The symbolic ecology of cities includes a wide variety of places of commemoration, including but not limited to place names. Nas (1998, p. 547) emphasized the “polyvocal” nature of urban commemorative symbols, suggesting that “they often possess an official meaning, bearing the intentions of the creator or creators in mind, but informal references may be attached to them, enforcing, neutralizing, and even counteracting the original intention.” This point is significant to the Riverside case. The process of attaching King’s name to the high school was open to multiple and competing interpretations about what it symbolized. Some parents attached certain social references and racial meanings to the school’s name that ran counter to the official intentions and motivations of school board members. In further outlining the notion of urban symbolic ecology, Nas (1998) also made a distinction between places of collective memory, such as places named after people who played a direct role in the development of a city, and places of historic memory, such as places named after people not related to a city’s history but of national or general importance. Although some scholars (including myself) may disagree with how he used the terms “collective” and “historic,” it is worth noting that communities often do make a distinction between the memorialization of local versus national figures. As will be shown in this paper, this very issue played a role in the Riverside debate.

The school naming in Riverside is part of a larger national movement to name (and rename) schools after figures—both local and national—who symbolize the historical achievements and struggles of minorities and other traditionally marginalized groups

(Abercrombie, 1998). New Orleans, Louisiana, and San Francisco, California, are two cities where this school naming movement has been particularly evident. In Louisiana, the Orleans Parish school board passed a policy that prohibited school names “honoring slave owners and others who did not respect equal opportunity for all.” Passed in 1992, the policy has led to more than 20 name changes, culminating with the highly publicized removal of Georgia Washington’s name from an elementary school in 1997 (Dart, 1997, p. D1). Accompanying the removal of names such as Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee has been the identification of schools with prominent local leaders such as the city’s first Black mayor, Ernest Morial, and nationally prominent African American figures such as Arthur Ashe, Barbara Jordan, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Thurgood Marshall, and of course Martin Luther King, Jr. In San Francisco, Drake Elementary School, the namesake of the 16th century sea captain, has been renamed Malcolm X Academy. Cesar Chavez Elementary School replaced the name Nathaniel Hawthorne. In addition to a Martin Luther King, the city by the bay has identified schools with civil rights activist Rosa Parks and slain gay rights activist Harvey Milk. In 1996, San Francisco’s school board president was quoted as saying: “We’re trying to give the schools names that have contemporary meaning for our students, and reflect current values” (Asimov and Wallace, 1996, p. A13).

As evident in New Orleans and San Francisco, some people view school naming as an important arena for remaking student knowledge and identification with the past. According to Katz (1995), place names promote identification and connection with certain social goals and ideological interests. Berg and Kearns (1996) argued that place naming, as part of both the symbolic and material order, represents a way of “norming” or legitimating certain meanings attached to people and places. Because of their normative power, commemorative place names connect or “bridge” people together in a common historical frame of reference as well as a geographic one. Stump (1988, p. 204) defined the specific symbolic connections made when naming a school after someone: “The naming of a school in honor of an individual has a special significance, creating an overt association between the person and community. This act is essentially hortatory, calling on the community to follow the path set by the school’s namesake.”

Proponents interpreted the naming of the Riverside high school in terms of students identifying with and unifying around King’s ideals. As stated by school board member Lewis Vanderzyl, who first proposed naming the high school for MLK:

My concern really was that we had here a leader [King] who exemplified some ideals that I think are really important in America.... He exists in a way that I think all of us can appreciate...[W]e recommended his name...because of the ideals for which he stood, which we thought were appropriate for all students, and certainly would set an example for all students and provide for them a body of writing, a body of speeches that ... would help to inspire kids, not just now but for generations to come (*CNN Talk Back Live*, January 12, 1998).

Notice the emphasis Vanderzyl placed on integration (“an example for all students”) and the value he invests in school naming as a means of socialization and education, particularly when combined with King’s writings and teachings. Commentator Christine McCottrill (1998, p. 8) interpreted the naming of the Riverside school as an exercise in the

integrationist philosophy advocated by King. She also characterized opposition to the naming as an indication of how far society still has to come in embracing this philosophy.

Public education rightly has one of its goals King's vision that people should judge one another by the quality of their character and not their color. If people are not able to look beyond color when it comes to making decisions as small as naming a school, what does that say for us as a whole?

Although place names promote connections, they are also used to divide or differentiate places and, in turn, the people who come to be associated with those places. School naming is a potentially controversial platform for public commemoration and reformation of student/parent identity because naming is a form of boundary construction (Ruane and Cerulo, 2000). For example, Myers (1996) examined the use of place naming in Zanzibar as various social groups sought to make distinctions between neighborhoods and distance themselves from these places culturally. The role of place names in creating boundaries is related in part to their function as "intertext" or referents to other cultural meanings (Entrikin, 1991, p. 56). "Place names are powerful linguistic symbols that evoke a wide range of poignant associations, both mental and physical, illustrating how people learn to think 'with' the landscape and not just 'about' it" (Thornton, 1997, p. 221). As Berg and Kearns (1996) found in New Zealand, place names evoke symbolic meaning and can lead to the coding of landscapes—the association of spaces with certain class, gender, or racial groups.

While school board officials and other proponents interpreted the naming of Riverside's high school as a means of integrating "all" students into a common identification with Martin Luther King, others interpreted the school naming in terms of boundaries. Naming a school for King was viewed by some of its opponents as demarcating the school and hence its students as African American. As one opponent stated: "Martin Luther King was a great man. But naming this school for him would be a mistake. Everybody will think we have a Black school here" (Terry, 1998, p. A12). This statement serves to racialize the meaning and importance of King's commemoration, suggesting that a school named for the civil rights leader is a "Black" thing. In effect, boundaries are placed around whose identity can be connected with places named for King. The feelings expressed by this person are very similar to the perspectives held by some citizens toward naming streets after Martin Luther King, Jr. Opponents often identify MLK streets with the Black community and, as with the school naming in Riverside, fear the social connotations and consequences of this identification (Alderman, 2000).

In the case of schools and streets named after King, place naming is part of the discursive construction of race—the representation of racial categories and boundaries as important social and spatial distinctions (Omi and Winant, 1994; Buttny, 1999). While the MLK school naming debate is involved in the social construction of "Blackness" as a racial category, it is also involved in the construction of "Whiteness." Whiteness, as suggested in critical race theory, is a position of privilege constructed "by controlling dominant values and institutions and, in particular, by occupying space within a segregated social landscape" (Kobayashi and Peake, 2000, p. 393). Geographers are increasingly interested in identifying and analyzing the geographic sites at which Whiteness is served and imagined as mainstream and normal (Bonnet, 1997; Dwyer and Jones, 2000). While

there is little space to adequately delve into this topic, the Riverside case points to the role that school names, and geography in general, play in the representation and maintenance of a White American identity. At the very least, the debate in southern California demonstrates, as Reingold and Wike (1998) found, that race and racial attitudes play an important role in struggles over heritage and the public display of commemorative symbols.

Not all parents opposed to naming the Riverside high school after King cited the importance of race. The debate, however, still revolved around the issue of boundaries and the relevance of identifying the community (and its school) with the memory of King. Several people interviewed by the media argued for naming the new high school after the area's citrus industry. One possible honoree mentioned was Eliza Tibbets, who was responsible for bringing orange trees to Riverside in the 1880s (Terry, 1998). Opponents to a King high school expressed the need to demarcate and prioritize civic heritage over honoring, as Riverside parent Barbara Knudsen put it, "a national figure with no local connection." Knudsen said:

Well, it's a matter of civic pride, really. The names of the new high school should come from Riverside's very noble, distinguished citrus heritage. More than any other community in Southern California, we've pioneered the citrus industry.... We're proud of that, and we think it's sufficiently inspirational that we don't need to go out of town for an inspirational name for our high school (*CNN Talk Back Live*, January 12, 1998).

Implicit in this call to recognize "heritage" is a de-prioritizing of the historical impact of King when compared to local efforts to develop the region. The construction and representation of heritage, as suggested by Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996, p. 21), is inherently exclusionary.

At its simplest, all heritage is someone's heritage and therefore logically not someone else's: the original meaning of an inheritance implies the existence of disinheritance and by extension any creation of heritage from the past disinherits someone completely or partially, actively or potentially.

By characterizing the commemoration of King as "going out of town" for inspiration, the aforementioned parent evokes a vision of heritage that actively disinherits Martin Luther King from Riverside's past and defines the civil rights leader as an outsider—one beyond the historical boundaries or interests of the community. On the other hand, as one commentator sarcastically pointed out, naming the Riverside high school for MLK could be seen as appropriate since conservative Whites in the area frequently used the civil rights leader's words to justify and gain passage of Proposition 209, which banned affirmative action policies in California (Lee, 1998). Running throughout these debates about whether King is a locally relevant historical figure is a "politics of scale," a socially negotiated process of determining the geographic extent or resolution at which King should be memorialized (Alderman, 1996).

Fittingly, the historical legacy of Martin Luther King is one of boundaries and his efforts to tear down the walls of racial segregation and inequality. Also fittingly, the public school served as a major cultural and political arena during the civil rights movement. Ironically, King's commemoration is still about African Americans and other activists

struggling to redefine the bounds of social interaction and perception in America's schools. In summary, I have suggested that public schools are more than places devoted to the intellectual development of students. They are also sites of socialization and arenas for constructing and debating the cultural identity of students and the attendant community. Events in Riverside illustrate how school names can be interpreted by one social group as a means of integrating and inspiring students historically and viewed by another group as a means of drawing racial boundaries around students and discriminating against them. My intent in the next several sections is to document the characteristics of MLK public schools in the U.S., examining the actual boundaries that surround King's commemoration in terms of location, grade level, and race—factors that potentially affect the politics of the naming process.

### THE FREQUENCY OF MLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Despite the national attention that the Riverside debate attracted in 1998, we know little about the likelihood of finding schools identified with King. Using data from the late 1980s, Roger Stump (1988) found 59 public and private schools in the United States identified with the civil rights leader. In this study, I examined only public schools. This does not deny the importance of naming patterns among private schools. However, the naming of private institutions differs, in process and politics, from the naming of public landscape features. Moreover, a recent search of private schools uncovered only three facilities named for King. They are in Baton Rouge (LA), Cincinnati (OH), and New Rochelle (NY) (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999b).

The *Common Core of Data, 1997–1998* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000a) was used to identify the frequency and location of public schools named after Martin Luther King, Jr. and to collect information on the race and grade level of students attending these schools. The data provide insight into the distribution of MLK schools at the time that the Riverside naming debate was underway. The *Common Core of Data*, which is the Department of Education's primary database on public elementary and secondary education in the United States, contains information collected from annual surveys of all public elementary and secondary schools (approximately 90,000) and school districts (approximately 16,000). The data are comparable across cities and states.

As of the 1997–1998 academic year, 110 public schools in the nation were named after Martin Luther King. Of these schools, 75 were listed in the database as including Martin Luther King, MLK, or ML King in their names. The remaining 35 schools were listed in the database as simply “King” schools. A search of school web pages and phone interviews with school officials confirmed that these schools were named for the civil rights leader. To place this figure in a meaningful comparative context, the *Common Core of Data* was used to identify the number of schools named after other noteworthy historical figures (Table 1). The naming of schools after King is a smaller and younger commemorative movement compared to the number of schools named for U.S. presidents such as Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. However, MLK schools are much closer in frequency to schools named for President John F. Kennedy, a contemporary of King. The statistical importance of naming schools in honor of Martin Luther King becomes even more apparent when one examines the number of schools named for nonpresidential figures in history. This selected list of figures includes farm labor leader

**TABLE 1.**—NUMBER OF U.S. PUBLIC SCHOOLS NAMED FOR SELECTED FIGURES IN AMERICAN HISTORY, 1997–1998

Historical figure	Number of named schools
Abraham Lincoln	676
George Washington	601
Thomas Jefferson	458
John F. Kennedy	190
Martin Luther King, Jr.	110
Cesar Chavez	25
Thurgood Marshall	25
Robert E. Lee	20
Frederick Douglass	16
Booker T. Washington	13
George Washington Carver	8
Harriet Tubman	8
Rosa Parks	6
Jefferson Davis	6
Langston Hughes	6
Malcolm X	5
Barbara Jordan	4
Arthur Ashe	3

*Source:* Compiled by author using *The Common Core of Data*.

Cesar Chavez; Confederate icons Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis; and African American activists Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, and Arthur Ashe.

The 110 MLK schools are distributed unevenly across 36 states and the District of Columbia (Fig. 1). However, eight states contribute 59% of these schools. They include California (22), New Jersey (9), Michigan (8), Illinois (7), New York (7), Florida (4), Massachusetts (4), and Ohio (4). These findings are consistent with results from Stump (1988), who found the largest number of MLK schools in the northern and western parts of the country. He found, as this study does, a relative scarcity of schools named after King in the Southeast—despite the fact that many of these states were early battlegrounds in the civil rights movement and that African Americans make up a significant proportion of the population in these states. For example, Georgia—King’s home state and the location of a national historical site dedicated to his memory—had named only two public



**Fig. 1.** Location of MLK Public Schools in the United States, 1997–1998. *Source:* Compiled by author using *The Common Core of Data, 1997–1998*.

schools after the civil rights leader by 1997–1998 (in Macon and Atlanta).<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that while Georgia has not named many schools, it does lead the nation in naming streets for Martin Luther King, Jr. (Alderman, 2000). Stump (1988, pp. 208–209) suggested that southern Whites are more likely to resist the naming of schools (as opposed to streets) because it was those “institutions that figured most prominently in the conflict over racial integration.”

Examining only the absolute or raw number of MLK schools can be misleading given that states vary by the number of schools. Consequently, the frequency of MLK schools was calculated as a percentage of all schools found in each state. Data on the total number of schools by state were collected from the *Common Core of Data* to ensure consistency. The percentage of schools in each state named for King was then divided by the percentage of all U.S. schools that are named for King (0.12%), resulting in the calculation of a location quotient. A location quotient allows us to compare the proportion of MLK schools in each state to the national average. A location quotient provides a more standardized picture of the frequency of naming schools for King relative to the total number of schools in each state and the overall level of naming within the country. For instance, a quotient of 1 indicates that the proportion of schools named for King in a particular state is representative of or equal to the proportion for the entire nation. A location quotient of less than 1 indicates an underrepresentation of MLK schools within a state when

<sup>5</sup>Two Georgia cities have named schools for Martin Luther King, Jr., since the collection of data for this paper—Decatur and Albany. One of these (Decatur) is a high school, although the vast majority of its students are African American.

compared to the national norm. In contrast, a quotient of greater than 1 indicates that MLK schools are present in greater than expected numbers, an overrepresentation when compared to the average for the country.

An examination of location quotients (Table 2) challenges the primacy of California within the geography of naming public schools after the civil rights leader. When examining proportional representation rather than absolute numbers, naming public schools appears more important in the District of Columbia (4.87) and states such as Delaware (4.48), New Jersey (3.24), and Rhode Island (2.65) than California. However it is worth noting that California (with a location quotient of 2.24) still has a disproportionately large presence of MLK schools when compared to the trend for the nation. In total, 19 states have a larger proportion of named schools than we would expect nationally. The South claims only three of these states (Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana). Six are western states and the remaining ten states are concentrated in the Northeast and Northcentral portions of the country.

#### MLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY CITY SIZE AND INTRA-URBAN LOCATION

*The Common Core of Data* provides information on the nation's public schools by city size and general intraurban location. Such data give insight into the likelihood of finding MLK schools across large and small cities and in central city locations as well as urban fringe/suburban locations. Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of MLK schools by locale and, for the purpose of comparison, the distribution of all U.S. public schools within these same locale categories. During the 1997–1998 academic year, 56% of schools named for King were associated with large cities (defined in the database as being within a Consolidated Metropolitan Statistical Area (CMSA) or Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) in which the central city has a population equal to or greater than 250,000). An additional 39% of schools were associated with mid-size cities (defined as being within a CMSA or MSA in which the population of the central city is less than 250,000).

King schools occupy central city locations 74% of the time, divided almost equally between mid-size and large urban designations. In fact, King's name is over 2.5 times more likely to be attached to schools in large and mid-size central cities than what we would expect nationally. Consequently, there is a significant underrepresentation of named schools in the urban fringe or suburb locations of large and mid-size cities. Of schools named for King, 4% were categorized as being in "large towns," an incorporated place or Census designated place with population greater than or equal to 25,000 and located outside a CMSA or MSA. This is higher than the percentage of all U.S. public schools found in such locales. The greatest absence of public schools named for King is in small towns and rural areas. Small towns are defined in the *Common Core* database as an incorporated place or Census designated place with population less than 25,000 and greater than or equal to 2,500 and located outside a CMSA or MSA. A rural area is any incorporated place, Census designated place, or nonplace territory designated as rural by the Census Bureau. Of all U.S. public schools, 13% are located in "small towns" and 25% in "rural" locations. However, no schools named for King are found within the "small town" locale categorization and only one MLK school was designated as "rural" (a vocational school in Woodville, Mississippi). These results depart somewhat from Alderman

**TABLE 2.**—DISTRIBUTION AND CONCENTRATION OF MLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY STATE (SORTED BY LOCATION QUOTIENT), 1997–1998

State	Total schools	MLK schools	MLK schools (%)	Location quotient
District of Columbia	171	1	0.585	4.87
Delaware	186	1	0.538	4.48
New Jersey	2314	9	0.389	3.24
Rhode Island	314	1	0.318	2.65
California	8182	22	0.269	2.24
Maryland	1300	3	0.231	1.92
Nevada	455	1	0.220	1.83
Nebraska	1375	3	0.218	1.82
Massachusetts	1868	4	0.214	1.78
Michigan	3862	8	0.207	1.73
Alaska	506	1	0.198	1.65
Mississippi	1013	2	0.197	1.65
Colorado	1562	3	0.192	1.60
Connecticut	1080	2	0.185	1.54
New York	4208	7	0.166	1.39
Illinois	4244	7	0.165	1.37
Florida	2888	4	0.139	1.15
Washington	2180	3	0.138	1.15
Louisiana	1488	2	0.134	1.12
New Mexico	745	1	0.134	1.12
Georgia	1823	2	0.110	0.91
Ohio	3945	4	0.101	0.84
Wisconsin	2112	2	0.095	0.79
Pennsylvania	3181	3	0.094	0.79
Arkansas	1112	1	0.090	0.75
Oregon	1253	1	0.080	0.67
Alabama	1353	1	0.074	0.62
Kentucky	1418	1	0.071	0.59
Arizona	1429	1	0.070	0.58
Iowa	1552	1	0.064	0.54
Tennessee	1571	1	0.064	0.53
Oklahoma	1840	1	0.054	0.45
Virginia	1910	1	0.052	0.44
Indiana	1926	1	0.052	0.43
Minnesota	2260	1	0.044	0.37
Missouri	2301	1	0.043	0.36
Texas	7090	2	0.028	0.24

Source: Compiled by author using *The Common Core of Data*.

**TABLE 3.**—DISTRIBUTION OF MLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY LOCALE AND HIGHEST GRADE TAUGHT, 1997–1998<sup>a</sup>

Locale and highest grade taught	MLK public schools (%)	U.S. public schools (%)
School locale		
Large central city	38	13
Mid-size central city	36	15
Urban fringe of large city	18	24
Urban fringe of mid-size city	3	9
Large town	4	2
Small town	0	13
Rural	1	25
Highest grade taught		
Third grade	5	2
Fourth grade	6	4
Fifth grade	31	25
Sixth grade	21	19
Eighth grade	28	19
Twelfth grade	10	23

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding; not all grade categories are listed.

Source: Compiled by the author using *The Common Core of Data*.

(2000), who found that while the naming of streets after King was best represented in metropolitan areas, the practice was also common in nonmetropolitan areas.

The strong association between King's commemoration and school naming in central city locales is of more than just passing empirical interest. Recent statistics point to a strong relationship between a school's location and the racial/ethnic composition of its student membership. Since 1970, African Americans have accounted for over 30% of students attending public schools in central cities. Even more significant, however, has been the increase in Hispanic students attending central city public schools, from 1 in 10 students in 1972 to 1 in 4 in 1996 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000c, p. 1). Given this trend, we should perhaps expect to find a high proportion of minority students in MLK schools and it is likely that this minority student membership will not be entirely African American.

Central city public schools also face significant resource challenges. Overall, 45% of students in the country's central city public schools receive free or reduced price lunches (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000b, p. 427). In the case of central city MLK schools, 54% of students receive free or reduced price lunches. In 1999, Journalist Amber Arellano discussed the lack of instructional technology in Detroit's Martin Luther King Jr. Senior High School, contrasting it to a better-equipped suburban Martin Luther King

Academy in Mt. Clemens, Michigan (Arellano, 1999). In 1989, Martin Luther King Junior High School and other East St. Louis public schools were evacuated after being flooded with sewage from two failed pumping stations. The East St. Louis school district closed the King school and one next door (named after John F. Kennedy) in 1992 because of constant flooding and water backup problems. The King school is currently under demolition (Nathaniel Anderson, superintendent, East St. Louis School District 189, pers. comm., January 3, 2001). Although not included in the data used in this study, the Martin Luther King High School in Riverside represents a departure from the depressed “central city” pattern. Located in an urban fringe or suburban area, the \$43 million school boasts of having a large technology infrastructure, a terraced outdoor amphitheater, and an innovative curriculum that includes computer repair and hotel management courses (Leuer, 1999b).

Location affects more than just the ethnic composition and financial viability of a school. Central cities are often perceived as inferior, marginalized areas, which may give insight into the negative image that MLK schools have in the minds of some Americans. This perception was clearly evident in an article written by conservative Black radio talk-show host Ken Hamblin, who appeared on the Montel Williams television show to discuss naming the Riverside school for King.

People in Riverside believe that naming their majority White school after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would hinder their children’s chances for college because their middle-class kids—Black and White alike—would be perceived as having attended *a low income, low achievement school with a majority of African-American students....* It’s one thing to start your life and struggle beyond the odds in *an inner-city school called Martin Luther King High School....* It’s quite another thing to strap thousands of graduating seniors with the need to explain on college applications how “their Martin Luther King High School” was indeed mainstream and that their academic record from that school was on par with other mainstream schools (Hamblin, 1998, p. C7, emphasis added).

According to Anita Calhoun, former principal of Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in San Diego, many people share the perception articulated by Hamblin. In 1990, she was quoted as saying: “They [the public] think any school that’s named after Dr. King would be an inner-city area, and I think in most cases across the country they would be right.... I think that’s a tragedy. I think Dr. King’s name should be in all places and all neighborhoods” (*San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 15, 1990, p. C1). Quite possibly, parents in Riverside associated a school named for King not only with “Black” students but also with the urban locations that are often associated with racial and ethnic minority populations. This was perhaps in the mind of a person who made an anonymous call to the Riverside school board office when he or she said: “We are not L.A....there aren’t enough Blacks in this area to name it [school] MLK” (Acosta 1998b, p. B3). As Holloway (1998) has suggested, a meaningful analysis of racial discrimination cannot take place outside the context of neighborhood characteristics and place-based discrimination. Perhaps, naming schools for King exposes the geographically contingent nature of how Americans perceive race and define its social importance.

On the other hand, the concentration of MLK schools in central city locations may not be entirely negative. Carolyn Huff, principal of Atlanta’s Martin Luther King Middle

School, suggested that her school has benefited from being identified with King's memory and adopting his principles of nonviolence. She remarked: "As you know, in urban schools, there tends to be some violence, and it's made a difference having our school being the school of peace in the name of the man [King]" (*CNN Talk Back Live*, January 12, 1998). Indeed, King's name is attached to several central-city schools committed to improving life and education within their communities. For instance, a career center in Anchorage, Alaska, uses its centrally located facilities to train secondary school youth in advanced job skills. Louisville's MLK Elementary—which is located in a predominantly African American part of the city and near an empowerment zone—is a magnet program that focuses on gifted education, visual/performing arts, and technology. Its motto reads "Where Dreams Come True." King's name can be found on an applied science magnet school located in the southern section of downtown Syracuse. The school claims to be the only community school in central New York, offering an array of services and programs to parents, students, and others living near the school such as neighborhood education and training for work and a unified health care program. Clearly, additional work is needed to understand the negative and positive implications of identifying largely central-city schools with King's name.

#### MLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS BY GRADE LEVEL

As evident in the Riverside controversy, opponents represented the naming of schools after Martin Luther King—whether legitimately or not—in terms of how it may hurt college entrance opportunities for students. Conceivably, identifying students with King's memory may grow more contentious and less frequent as one moves up the grade-level hierarchy. Findings appear to substantiate this hypothesis. Table 3 shows the percentage distribution of MLK schools by highest grade taught and, for the purpose of comparison, the distribution of all U.S. public schools by these same grade-level categories. Only 11 (10%) of 110 public schools identified with Martin Luther King, Jr., listed twelfth grade as the highest academic level taught in the school—a significantly lower figure than the 23% of US public schools at this same grade level. Over one-third of named schools reported student memberships that were not taught beyond the fifth grade. When compared to the national trend there is an over-representation of MLK schools that teach up to the eighth grade. When simply analyzing the names of schools, King's name is most often attached to "elementary" and "middle" schools—almost 70% of the time. It is worth noting, however, that grade definitions of "elementary" schools as well as "middle," "junior high," and "high schools" vary by city, state, and region.

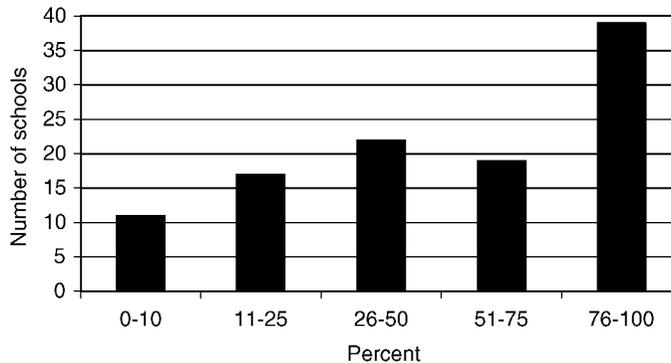
What is especially apparent is a weak association between the commemoration of King and the naming of secondary educational institutions that immediately precede college entrance. The naming of a high school may be more controversial than naming lower grade level schools because high school students (and their parents) feel they have a greater personal stake in cultivating a distinctive school identity. The importance placed on constructing such an identity is evident, for example, in the rivalry of high school athletics. Barbara Knudsen, who opposed naming the Riverside school for King, discussed the importance of high schools reflecting and serving "local" community identity. On this point, she argued: "A high school really becomes the center of gravity in a community much more than an elementary or middle school does. The other four high schools

[in Riverside] have names that have strictly a local connection.... This is a matter of hometown pride" (*CNN Talk Back Live*, January 12, 1998).

School board/district policies toward naming partly explain the patterns seen in the grade level of MLK schools. For example, according to the naming guidelines adopted by the public school system of Albuquerque, New Mexico, high schools are to be named after geographic locations, middle schools after late U.S. presidents, and elementary schools after persons "who have provided positive role models for APS students" (Albuquerque Public Schools, 1996). Jefferson County School District in Colorado (1999) has also put some parameters on naming, although not as strict as Albuquerque. Elementary and middle schools can be named for outstanding citizens in the community, but senior high schools will be named for the locality or community in which they are located. The majority of schools in Arizona's Gilbert Unified School District are named after subdivisions. The superintendent of Gilbert was quoted as saying: "We don't name schools after people because it creates hard feelings" (Abercrombie, 1998, p. 11). Lake Washington School District #414 in Redmond, Washington, employs a two-tier approach to naming new facilities (Lake Washington School District #414, 1999). According to its board policies, elementary schools are to be named for "deceased persons famous for their work in science, the humanities, letters, or education." Secondary schools are to be named after the neighborhood or district in which the school is located. If named for a person, secondary schools are to be identified with someone related to local, area, or Pacific Northwest history. In an attempt to reach out to minorities, the Lake Washington School District mandates that one out of every three new elementary schools shall be named for a minority group member. While much more inclusive than naming policies in other places; it still confines, nevertheless, the place name commemoration of historical figures—particularly "nonlocal" minority figures such as King—to elementary schools. Some school systems such as in Pitt County, North Carolina, prohibit naming any schools after people (Clancey, 2001).

### RACIAL COMPOSITION OF MLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Although some social actors, such as those in Riverside, hold strong views about the racial connotations of naming schools after Martin Luther King, we actually know little about the race and ethnicity of students attending such schools. According to statistics collected from *The Common Core of Data*—67,825 students were enrolled in public schools named after King in 1997–1998. Of these students, 54% were African American, 21% White, 19% Hispanic, 5% Asian or Pacific Islander, and less than 1% American Indian or Alaskan native. Figure 2 gives a more detailed look at the distribution of schools by the relative size of African American student populations within each school. African Americans represent a majority of student membership in 58 (or 53%) of 109 MLK public schools that have available racial data. Blacks contribute over three-quarters of the student body in 39% of MLK schools. Of the 58 named schools with an African American majority, 43% have enrollment in which Blacks represent 90% or more of the total. Seven of the nation's MLK public schools were entirely African American in 1997–1998. Two of the schools are in Detroit (MI) and the remaining five are located in Baltimore (MD), Chicago (IL), Gary (IN), Dixmoor (IL), and Tuscaloosa (AL).



**Fig. 2.** Number of U.S. MLK Public Schools by Percentage of African American Students, 1997–1998. *Source:* Compiled by author using *The Common Core of Data*.

Although African Americans do make up a majority (although not an overwhelming majority) of all students enrolled in MLK schools, finding a school named for King does not necessarily mean that African Americans will make up most of the student membership. In fact, of the 109 MLK schools examined, twenty eight (or 26%) had student memberships in which African Americans made up a quarter or less of the total. In twelve of these twenty-eight schools, Blacks contributed less than 10% of the total student population. While Whites contributed a quarter or less of student membership in 64% of schools bearing King’s name, they did make up a majority of the student enrollment in 22% of schools. In 1997–1998, Whites represented three-quarters or more of the student membership in six schools. They are located in Anchorage (AK), Greenbay (WI), Milton (FL), Colorado Springs (CO), Galesburg (IL), and Las Vegas (NV). Hispanics constitute a majority of student membership in eleven (10%) of the public schools named for King. Eight of these eleven schools are located in California. Although not as frequently found in King schools as Hispanics, students classified as Asian/Pacific Islanders made up 42% and 41% of total MLK school enrollment in San Francisco and Sacramento respectively. African American students represented a majority in only four of California’s 22 public schools named for King (Oakland with 81%, Los Angeles with 73%, Sausalito with 67%, and Richmond with 65%). In the case of Davis, California—where King’s named is attached to an alternative high school—Whites actually constituted a majority (55%) of the total student membership in 1997–1998. However, until the opening of the Riverside school in 1999, the Davis school and one in Nashville (TN) were the nation’s only MLK high schools with a White majority.

African Americans certainly have a strong statistical presence in King schools. Yet, the commemoration of Martin Luther King is more likely to signify that a large proportion of the student membership is “minority,” including a significant presence of Hispanic Americans and, to a lesser degree, Asian Americans. Overall, “minority” students constitute a majority of student membership in 78% of the country’s MLK schools. Of named schools, 26 (24%) of named schools are composed of 99% or more minority students. It is worth noting that this pattern is not necessarily unique to King schools. Overall, the country has seen an increase in the percentage of minority enrollment, leading to a

**TABLE 4.—RACIAL COMPOSITION OF MLK PUBLIC SCHOOLS  
VERSUS ALL PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CALIFORNIA, 1997–1998**

Racial/ethnic group	Students in MLK public schools (%) <sup>a</sup>	Students in all public schools (%)
Hispanic	47	41
Black	26	9
White	14	39
Asian/Pacific Islander	13	11
American Indian	.5	.9
Minority	86	61

<sup>a</sup>Percentages do not sum to 100 because of rounding.

Source: Compiled by author using *The Common Core of Data*.

“racial-ethnic isolation” in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999a, p. 120). In California, the association of King’s memory with Hispanic and Asian students as well as African Americans is not surprising given the state’s prevailing demographic trends (Table 4). Of students in MLK schools, 47% are identified as Hispanic, compared to 41% of students in all California public schools in 1997–1998. Asian/Pacific Islanders contribute 13% of MLK school enrollment in California, two percentage points higher than the trend found in all of the state’s public schools. Nevertheless, when compared to statewide demographic trends in enrollment, King schools in California do show a significant overrepresentation of African Americans and a significant underrepresentation of Whites.

In addition to data on the racial/ethnic composition of public schools, *The Common Core of Data* provides demographic indicators for the area served by a public school district or agency. This information, derived from 1990 U.S. Census data, allows us to compare the racial/ethnic characteristics of students attending a MLK school with the overall demographic makeup of children living in households within the school’s district. A child, in this instance, is defined as a never-married child less than 18 years who is a son or daughter by birth, a stepchild, or an adopted child of the householder. Findings indicate that 83% of the time a school named for King has a higher percentage of African Americans than the area served by its respective school district. Indeed, on average, the relative size of Black student populations in MLK schools is 21 percentage points higher than the proportion of Black children found in the larger school district area. On average, African Americans contribute a little over one-third of children in school districts that contain a school named for King. However, within the average MLK school, Blacks comprise well over half (55%) of the student membership. In 88% of cases, the frequency of finding White students in a King school is lower than the frequency of finding White children living in the surrounding district. In the case of Toledo (OH), Utica (NY), and Fort Lauderdale (FL), the percentage of Whites enrolled in MLK schools is over 60 points lower than the percentage of White children found in the larger school district area. While the average school named for King can expect Whites to makeup approximately 23% of its

student membership, its larger school district will serve an area in which Whites contribute 47% of the children population living in households.

While it is certainly inaccurate to label every MLK school as predominantly Black, it appears reasonable to suggest that most of the schools are more African American than their surrounding districts. In this respect, Riverside's Martin Luther King High represents a significant departure from the national pattern. In 1999, the racial characteristics of students attending the southern California school, which was 64% White and 10% Black, was almost proportional to the racial characteristics of children found living within the entire Riverside Unified School District, according to 1990 census figures. Clearly, more work is needed to determine the relative location of these named schools. How are MLK schools situated within the racial geography of their respective cities and towns? Do schools named for King enforce or, in the case of Riverside, challenge what Rhea (1997) called the "segregation of memory" within America? There are at least two major points to keep in mind as researchers examine this issue further. First, the racial/ethnic characteristics of schools and their school districts are in constant flux. Future work should examine changes and patterns in the racial/ethnic makeup of named schools in relation to larger population shifts within cities and their school districts. Second, the racial composition of schools is not something that just evolves naturally. The attendance boundaries of schools are constantly constructed, reconstructed, and contested as communities—whether voluntarily or because of court order—struggle to enact racial balance in schools. However, some researchers have pointed to the "resegregation" of America's public schools in the 1990s, resulting in part from Supreme Court decisions that make it easier for districts to be released from desegregation and bussing orders (Zehr, 2001). Perhaps the racial and ethnic separation evident in MLK schools is part of this larger trend. At any rate, it would be interesting to investigate how the presence of a school named in honor of Martin Luther King affects the way in which school board officials construct and reconstruct the racial geography of schools, particularly if some of them share the views expressed by some parents in Riverside who associated King strictly with the Black community and African American students.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

The struggle to name the Riverside school in 1998 sheds light on how people see and use school names as a means of integrating and orienting students around certain historical and cultural identifications. It is perhaps still too early to determine if the southern California school will rally students around the civil rights leader and his legacy. On the one hand, when the school opened in September 1999, a sophomore student seemed to dismiss the importance of King when she stated that: "It doesn't matter what the school's called.... It's exciting to open a school and a privilege for us to go here" (Leuer, 1999a, p. B02). In February of 2000, two vandals showed their dissatisfaction with King's namesake by spray-painting it with swastikas and racial epithets directed toward African Americans. One of the vandals was a King High student (Lee, 2001). On the other hand, the school honored King by painting a mural in the lobby and teachers supposedly incorporate the civil rights leader's ideals and philosophies into classroom lessons throughout the year (Leuer, 1999a). Future studies should examine the extent to which MLK schools incorporate their commemorative identity into everyday school and community activities.

In searching the web pages of many schools named for King, I found significant variation in patterns of school identification. Some named schools barely mention having a cultural linkage with him while others have written the school's very mission statement around the MLK legacy. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr. Middle School in Berkeley, California is "committed to practicing and teaching the ideals of King: equality, academic excellence, community action, respect for self and others, non-violence, and leadership based on democratic principles." MLK Elementary in Washington, DC claims that "The Dream is Still Alive" while King Elementary in the inner city of South Central Los Angeles pledges, "We have a dream...everyone succeeds at King!" While making little mention of King himself, the civil rights leader's namesake in Galesburg, Illinois calls itself "The Peaceable KINGdom."

The Riverside dispute also shows how school names can be interpreted and fought over as social boundaries, functioning as a form of exclusion rather than inclusion. Empirically, MLK schools transcend being labeled "Black" but do not fully integrate Whites with African Americans or Whites with minorities in general. This pattern is not likely to change as long as named schools are found most often in the central cities of large and mid-size cities. There are also bounds being placed on the grade level of schools identified with King, perhaps reflecting a trend among school boards to avoid the controversy of naming high schools after nonlocal figures or any person for that matter. The controversy over naming a school for MLK provoked a grand jury investigation and subsequent clarification of Riverside's school naming, which may place more stringent boundaries on future naming requests (Acosta, 1998c).

Future work should adopt a more critical approach to the construction of racial identity within public schools and the role that school names play in the representation and reaffirmation of Whiteness and Blackness in America. Arguably, in some cases, the association of King's memory with a largely African American student body may be seen as an opportunity rather than a drawback. For instance, the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Elementary School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin—which is an African American immersion school—focuses on the instructional needs of Black students, who made up 98% of the school's enrollment in 1997–1998. Its curriculum and faculty focus on African American culture, history, and learning styles. Interestingly, some African Americans could interpret the naming of largely White schools after King as a form of cultural appropriation. When the Riverside high school opened in 1999, one student remarked that: "I think there should be a few more Black people [on campus], because the school is Martin Luther King" (Leuer, 1999b, p. B1). Of course, schools named for King are about more than simply Black versus White relations and identities. The strong presence of non-African American minorities in King schools, particularly those in California, demands a multi-ethnic study of King's commemoration. For instance, do Hispanic and Asian parents and children embrace MLK as a hero for all Americans or do they consider him a leader for African American civil rights? By the same token, do African Americans identify with other minority historical figures? When the San Antonio City Council proposed to rename a prominent downtown street after Cesar Chavez, Black leaders opposed the proposal since the street in question passes through the African American community (Herrick, 1999). In this instance, African Americans—like White parents in Riverside—were placing clear boundaries around the relevance of history and memory as related to race and ethnicity.

Some critics have argued that the naming of schools after King and other controversial figures is wrong, suggesting that these schools are being used as a battleground for political differences. In fairness, however, school naming has long been involved in the cultural politics of race relations, not always to the benefit of African Americans. For example, when local authorities in Bulloch County, Georgia, began racially desegregating public schools in 1971, African American students boycotted the first six days of the school year. The boycott came in reaction to what they considered unfair integration policies. In addition to the demotion of principals of formerly all-Black schools to assistant roles and reductions in the number of Black teachers, African Americans objected to the county changing the names of formerly all-Black schools (*Statesboro Herald*, August 30, 1971, p. 1). While the boycott proved short-lived and unsuccessful, it demonstrates the need for examining the larger geo-historical context of recent school name changes.

While critics are wrong to imply that school naming has just recently become politicized, they do raise some interesting questions about the ultimate value of changes like those that we have seen in Riverside. In what specific ways, if any, has naming schools for King led to a positive change in the lives and attitudes of students? One observer pointed to this issue:

For about 25 years I've seen numerous school name changes, in addition to the names that go on new schools. The theory is that if you name a school for someone heroic, like Martin Luther King, the students feel obligated to put forth their best effort. Needless to say, it doesn't happen that way. Just as a new edifice doesn't guarantee higher academic achievement, neither will a prominent name. Just look at the many low-performing schools named for Dr. King. To paraphrase William Shakespeare, a school building by any other name performs the same. More important than the name inscribed in the building is what's going on inside. (*The Tampa Tribune*, November 23, 1997, p. 6, Commentary).

These comments alone could serve as a useful springboard for further research. The assertion that MLK schools are low-performing schools—while yet another example of the social boundaries being place around King's commemoration—inspires us to examine levels of academic performance in schools before and after being named. What effect, if any, do King schools (or any named school for that matter) have on the social, moral, and intellectual development of their students? Contrary to concerns raised in Riverside, it is unlikely that attending a Martin Luther King High School will hurt a student's chance to enter college. However, an important question remains unanswered. Do schools named for King connect students with a more integrated and equitable vision of America or do these named schools—because of the opposition, negative perceptions, and debate they sometimes draw—simply reinforce traditional racial and economic boundaries?

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