

Elizabeth Todd-Breland. *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s*

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Elizabeth Todd-Breland's deeply researched, powerful book, *A Political Education: Black Politics and Education Reform in Chicago since the 1960s*, tells the story of Chicago schooling over the last sixty years from the vantage point of Black actors and stakeholders. The book marks a substantive contribution to a body of historical literature that puts race at the core of our country's evolution, a stance that is not simply additive, but rather, one that allows Todd-Breland to redefine our understanding of the whole. Todd-Breland portrays the Black community as more than a monolithic or static group, seeking out and integrating into the narrative the important differences within the community. Not surprisingly, a twentieth-century narrative about education in a northern metropolis looks different when it is animated by the ingenuity and resilience of Black education reformers and propelled by a Black community that is, in this rendering, afforded real ideological diversity in its efforts to secure access to high-quality education for its children. Through this lens of Black agency, Todd-Breland skillfully reorients our understanding not only of the educational transformations of this period in Chicago, but of the larger context itself—the political, economic, and social forms of power that influenced those changes.

The winner of several noteworthy awards, *A Political Education* also garnered a slate of laudatory reviews, all of which single out the book's centering of Black activism and agency. Todd-Breland calls the through line of Black activism running through this history the "politics of Black achievement," a term that encompasses a range of activist endeavors, including "desegregation efforts in middle-class communities, community control of schools, the development of independent Black educational institutions, efforts to increase Black representation in the teaching force, demands for funding equalization, and the discourses of supporters of both Black neighborhood schools and charter schools" (p. 11). Against a rough chronology spanning the early 1960s through the mid-1980s, chapters 1 through 4 address the strategies of desegregation, community control, Black independent schooling, and growth in the number of Black teachers, as pursued by Black activists. Todd-Breland makes clear, however, that these approaches were never monolithic among reformers at any one moment and that, in fact, they overlapped across time, even as they were marshaled against consistent neglect on the part of the liberal welfare state to provide for educational equity.

The second part of the book (chapters 5 and 6) examines Harold Washington's election to mayor—a victory for Black-led coalitional politics but also a preface to

corporate school reform—and its aftermath. Indeed, Todd-Breland deftly traces the part that the educational approaches and models devised by Black activists in preceding decades played in the genealogy of corporate school reform, while also showing how and why models originally created in pursuit of equity were distorted and deployed instead toward fulfilling a market-based philosophy of privatization and “choice.” Within this liminal space, Todd-Breland documents the continued diversity of thought and action among Chicago’s Black populace, acknowledging divisions between Black families who “flocked” to charter schools, for instance, and the Black teachers who saw their hard-won gains within the existing system threatened.

Todd-Breland shows how, because of the diversity among Black activists and evolving conditions, tactics for improving the quality of Black children’s education over these years diverged and changed; as the author asserts, “no singular Black politics” (p. 50) held sway. What did remain constant across the long duration of struggle, more than any shared pedagogical or political vision, was the Black self-determinist commitment to improving the educational opportunity of Black children. In fact, the common thread was never the means but rather the end: a shared ideal of educational, economic, and racial justice. In this regard, *A Political Education* does away with the “strange bedfellows” claim—the liberal puzzlement over Black families’ choices to self-segregate in independent schools or to send their children to charter schools—by emphasizing the common aim for racial justice that drove the Black community’s varied forms of organizing and activism.

In her telling of this history, Todd-Breland significantly foregrounds the perspectives and contributions of Black women. Whether in service of independent Black alternatives to the public schools (as in the case of Soyini Walton and Carol D. Lee), Black community control of public resources (as with Barbara Sizemore), or Black teacher organizing efforts (as with Lillie Peoples’s leadership), these women emerge from the page as active agents of reform and as complex individuals. Todd-Breland allows them dynamism, describing, for instance, how Barbara Sizemore “was alternately perceived as a race-traitor . . . a radical Black Power community control advocate, a militant community-based researcher, and an ally of the corporate reorganization of public schools.” Reiterating a theme, Todd-Breland reminds readers that while Sizemore (and her contemporaries) may have changed tactics, she remained steady in her “quest to foster Black achievement” (p. 195).

As an education historian, I particularly appreciated the book’s treatment of urban education as a historical nexus, into which Todd-Breland brings together a range of historical scholarship—urban, Black, labor, women’s, political, and intellectual history—to argue for schools as sites of politics and pedagogy. The book presents, as well, a rare portrait of teachers in a northern city. Though scholars have produced a relatively robust literature on Black teachers in the South both before and after *Brown v. Board of Education*, much less is known about the lives and work of Black teachers in the urban North, especially during the latter half of the twentieth century. In providing a richly detailed accounting of Black teachers’ work and organizing in Chicago since the 1960s, *A Political Education* speaks to this gap. Unlike in New York City, for instance, where Black teachers struggled to gain a foothold in the system, Chicago’s Black teachers substantially increased their teaching presence in CPS between the late 1960s and 1970s. In 1978, when Black teachers accounted for

less than 12 percent of the NYC teaching force, they made up fully 43 percent of Chicago's teaching staff and, by the mid-1980s, actually outnumbered White teachers. Through their numbers, Black teachers helped to transform Black political power in Chicago, though, as Todd-Breland artfully shows, their increased presence did not always "translate into improvements in the quality of education for Black students or produce more radical teachers" (p. 132). Thanks to their "comfortable" middle-class status and association with the Chicago Teachers Union and Board of Education, Black teachers also found themselves at the "pivot point" of a debate about the role Black middle-class professionals ought to play in the wider Black freedom struggle. By writing about Black teachers' lives and impact in Chicago, Todd-Breland maps important uncharted territory. At the same time, her work invites deeper and broader investigation of the complicated contributions and challenges associated with Black teachers' work in the urban North. Such inquiry might more fully tackle ideological and strategic differences *among* teachers, in the same way that Todd-Breland traces these fissures among Black activists, or look across the geographically varied experiences of urban Black teachers.

Todd-Breland has gifted the field with a pristine example of meticulous research, possible in large part because of the author's relationships within the local networks she seeks to portray. The book draws not only on conventional archival sources, but on oral histories and the personal files of community activists, the author's possession of which depended upon her connections with the community over time. In addition to all its other strengths, then, this work attests to the importance of who writes history. Both for this methodological consideration and the book's arguments—about the Black freedom struggle, the intertwined politics of schooling, teachers, and northern cities in the post-World War II period, and Black women's labor and activism—*A Political Education* offers an excellent resource for historians and graduate learning alike.