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Column: Political courage and school segregation

By Carol Weissert and Lester Abberger, special to the Times

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Sixty years ago today — May 2, 1957 — Gov. LeRoy Collins courageously decried a resolution adopted by the Florida Legislature that declared the U.S. Supreme Court's landmark public school desegregation decision in *Brown vs. Board of Education* "null, void, and of no force or effect."

In his own handwriting, Collins called the resolution "an evil thing, whipped up by demagogues and carried on the hot and erratic winds of passion, prejudice and hysteria." He went on to say: "If history judges me right this day, I want it known I did my best to avert this blot. If I am judged wrong, then here in my own handwriting and over my signature is the proof of guilt to support my conviction."

The legislation, known as an interposition resolution, was strictly symbolic. The fact is, states cannot "interpose" themselves between their citizens and the federal government. But interposition was a politically popular notion among Southern segregationists in 1957 who were horrified by the implications of the *Brown* decision. Most Southern governors and congressional delegations enthusiastically embraced the interposition doctrine.

Collins had no authority to veto the resolution. It could have been conveyed to Congress without comment, which was ordinarily the case. Instead, Collins took a politically risky and unpopular stand, but did so from the moral high ground. History has indeed judged him right.

The resolution had no effect, and Florida ultimately complied with the *Brown* public education desegregation decision. Yet to this day, the challenges of equal educational opportunity continue to bedevil our state.

At present, a full third of Hispanic students and a full third of African-American students attend intensely segregated Florida K-12 schools. Moreover, many of these students suffer double segregation — not only by race but also by class. It appears that meaningful desegregation remains an elusive challenge.

The LeRoy Collins Institute at Florida State University, established in Gov. Collins' memory to address public policy issues, is conducting research in collaboration with the Civil Rights Project at UCLA to examine in depth the status of desegregation in Florida's schools and to understand the student attainment and policy implications of the situation.

Today, we are reminded again of Gov. Collins' political courage in making a bold statement and in his willingness to take an unpopular stand on the basis of his moral convictions. In our time, we must summon similar political courage to address once again with renewed moral conviction the issue and the insidious effects of segregation in public education. The Collins' legacy calls on us to do just that.

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