

## Frederick Wertham's Testimony

Taken from the Master's Thesis of Liza R. Rognas

Internationally famous psychiatrist Frederick Wertham's hour-long dialogue with attorneys from both sides followed testimony of Kenneth Clark and of several children who described their experiences as black students attending school in New Castle County's segregated school district. Wertham's eloquent testimony crystallized the ugly implications of segregation practices. Segregation harmed the children as well as the community, he explained, and it caused damage whether it was practiced for one year or one hundred. "We are dealing with the mind of a child and the emotions of a child of nine," he reminded the court, who is late for a bus going to a segregated school, and the state decrees it, and the bus for white children passes and the children stick out their tongues and say, "You nigger."<sup>1</sup> Wertham explained that segregation, whether practiced by custom or law, seriously impaired the mental health of the children who lived under it. Segregation took its most virulent form when practiced by the state because it not only harmed the people targeted, it challenged the ethical foundations of the state itself.<sup>2</sup>

Wertham used findings Gunnar Myrdal outlined in the early 1940s in his study of American racism. His words echoed the opinions of W.E.B. Du Bois and other anti-segregation activists. Even though his ideas were not new, Wertham's testimony captured the imagination and hearts of those in the courtroom. One example Wertham offered was particularly effective. He introduced popular comic book images to illustrate racism's pervasiveness in America's society. The comics showed Africans or African Americans depicted in stereotypical and humiliating situations. Their submissions as evidence along with Wertham's statements caused the testimony of defense witness, Superintendent George Miller, to pale in comparison.<sup>3</sup> After Wertham's disturbing and powerful treatise on segregation, Miller could only offer a weak salute to the state's recent equalization measures, including a provision requiring equal expenditures in white and segregated schools.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 445.

<sup>2</sup> In agreement with this general finding, the Truman Administration had filed *Amicus Curiae* briefs in all the school desegregation cases. Segregation did not combine well with America's democratic tradition, especially during Cold War propaganda battles with the U.S.S.R.

<sup>3</sup> *Belton v. Gebhart*, Plaintiff's Exhibits 1, 1A, and 1B.

<sup>4</sup> Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 445-447; Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 138.

Liza R. Rognas is a librarian and historian at The Evergreen State College Library in Olympia, Washington.