

Busing in Boston — 40 years later

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By Lew Finfer

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Buses carrying students from West Roxbury arrive at the Curley School in Jamaica Plain on Sept. 12, 1974, the first day of school under the new busing system. Globe File Photo.

By Lew Finfer **SEPTEMBER 03, 2014**

The most important civic event of the second half of the 20th century in Boston began 40 years ago this year with the decision by US Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr. to order the desegregation of the Boston public schools. He implemented his decision with an extensive cross-neighborhood busing program for students in all grades.

Busing and desegregation. People who were there then use only one of those terms to describe what happened. African-Americans and liberal whites called it desegregation, as

in court-ordered desegregation, and poor and working class whites called it busing. This divergence of words symbolizes the division that racked Boston then and continues, to some extent, to this day. Today's race relations are better than in the past, but for many of us of a certain age, any racial incident today can bring us right back to those scary days.

African-American parents and community leaders saw desegregation as the path to better education. Their schools were not good and were overcrowded. When white parents resisted the court order, it just confirmed to African-Americans the view that their children were being denied access to better schools. White parents on the other hand, didn't want to lose access to their neighborhood schools and feared sending their children to schools in neighborhoods they saw as more dangerous. Race divides and racism makes understanding and compassion so, so difficult.

Yet this was very much a class issue and not just a racial one. White poor and working class parents were told to comply with the court order as the right thing to do and had no realistic alternatives. Middle class white families, on the other hand, could afford private school options or move out of the city altogether. Suburbanites, from a comfortable distance, could focus on the higher principles involved and pass judgment on the white working class and poor whose everyday lives were turned upside down. Those directly affected were the less well-off, but those making the decisions and delivering the message lived in the suburbs, which were all exempted from the court order. Judge Garrity lived in Wellesley, Boston Globe Editor Tom Winship in Lincoln, and Senator Ted Kennedy in Hyannis. The schools in Boston's white neighborhoods were better than those in African-American neighborhoods, but hardly great places to get an education. Boston from 1974 to 1977 was a cauldron of division, worry, fear, and even hatred. It became more unsafe for people of color to walk in certain white neighborhoods and more unsafe for whites to be in neighborhoods of color. Hundreds of police had to protect buses filled with black school children from being stoned by whites each day as they traveled to South Boston and they were stoned anyway. It got so that when crime stories appeared in the newspaper, people tried to read into them whether they were white on black or black on white crimes that might spur more retaliation. Mary Ellen Smith, who tried to keep the peace in those years

as head of the Citywide Educational Coalition, called these times, “the war years in Boston; a story in streets and homes of families torn apart and lives on the line to obey a law all didn’t agree with.”

Many school nights, African-American parents and residents would meet at Freedom House on the Dorchester/Roxbury line to review that day’s tally of violent incidents and hound then Mayor Kevin White and the police to do a better job at public safety.

Meanwhile, strong anti-busing organizations formed in South Boston, Hyde Park, Charlestown, East Boston and Dorchester would organize countless well-attended protests at the schools, at Judge Garrity’s home in Wellesley, at City Hall, at the State House, and even at the US Capitol in Washington. The community organization I worked for then had only 1 site in all of Dorchester that both our Black and White members felt safe going to.

I volunteered in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, so integration to enable equal opportunity is a cherished value for me. I believed that the court decision here was aimed at ending the illegal segregation in our schools and enabling equal educational opportunity for all. But, did it improve the quality of education in the schools, especially for people of color? Not nearly enough for all that our city went through. Though that’s an on-going challenge in cities everywhere today.

With court-ordered busing, the value of integration was chosen over that of neighborhood schools as important local institutions. These schools could be places where parents would meet each other, share information about anything from sports leagues to jobs, and work on school fund-raisers together. Parents would get to know their child’s classmates and look out for their safety. And all of it more important as local churches draw less neighborhood residents than they used to.

It is hard for me to say this, but Garrity’s plan failed or we together failed to find a way to value integration and justice for *all*. Forty years after his order, Boston’s schools are not integrated at all. They went from 60 percent white and 40 percent children of color in 1974 to 13 percent white today. There are many reasons for this “white flight.” They include parents not wanting to give up the value of neighborhood schools, feeling that the schools were not high in quality, or carrying racial fears. Many people of color chose to move their

kids into the METCO busing program to suburban schools, and to parochial, charter, and private schools, as they tried hard to find the best schools for their kids.

Ted Landsmark was the victim of a vicious racial attack during the battles over busing in 1976. But in describing the challenge of reaching today's youths about what happened then, he said: "You might as well be talking to them about Lincoln freeing the slaves as talk to them about busing and how it tore neighborhoods apart".

A little education about the era would go a long way. Important books by Ron Formisano, Mel King, Ione Malloy, Michael MacDonald, Jim Vrabel, and especially Anthony Lukas's "Common Ground," poignantly and thoroughly recount those times. "The Union of Minority Neighborhoods" has a dialogue and research project on the era as well.

We walk in a city that has been so much shaped by those events 40 years ago. We stand on the shoulders of those who worked to keep our city together in those hard times. But as we look back, let us learn from the mistakes of our common past.

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