The Boston Busing Crisis:

The Negative Effects of a Well-intentioned Plan

Madison Pilarski

Nathan Koenecke

Rebecca Huebner

Shino Iwashita

Education Foundations 408: Foundations of American Education

Professor Petronicolos

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On April 22 and 23, 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. traveled to Boston, Massachusetts in an effort to rally the city toward racial equality. Leading a 20,000 person march on the Boston Commons, King made an exceptionally profound assertion to the city of Boston: “The vision of a new Boston must extend to the heart of Roxbury and the mind of every child now being stifled in segregated schools. Boston must become a testing ground for the ideals of freedom.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It would take the city of Boston over 10 years to respond to King’s plea. Boston, for a long time, had been a city characterized by de facto school segregation, as most schools had predominately homogeneous student populations, despite such practices being outlawed in Massachusetts. However, the court ruling issued by Judge Garrity in 1974 ordering the desegregation of Boston schools permanently changed Boston’s education. Garrity, acting on a suit filed by the NAACP on behalf of a group of white parents, ordered desegregation to take place, but slowly--over a two year period.[[2]](#footnote-2) Garrity’s plan relied heavily on busing. How did the people of Boston, particularly minority groups, fare after and during the 1970s busing crisis? Despite the well-intended goals of the busing in Boston during the 1970s, the policy negatively affected students’ education, especially minority students, because it induced negative race relations that manifested themselves in overt racist reactions. Furthermore, the busing policy provoked extreme acts of violence, infringed on individual freedoms, sped up Boston’s white flight phenomenon, and was injurious to students’ education.

Background

The primary foundation for most of the desegregation efforts in the United States is grounded in the milestone case of Oliver Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka in 1954. The case explicitly ruled that segregation on the basis of race was a direct violation of citizen’s rights under the Constitution of the United States. Granted, a court ruling by no means equates to an immediate change in policy among the people or their institutions. School desegregation would be no exception, as it was August of 1965 before the state of Massachusetts revealed deliberate plans to desegregate its schools by proposing the Racial Imbalance Act, which effectively banned de facto school segregation. The proposal demanded that the Massachusetts State Board of Education require its local school committees to develop and implement desegregation plans with the ultimatum of withholding funding if such orders were not followed. With respect to Boston schools, another decade would pass before additional directives would be demanded by higher authorities in response to an accusation of non-compliance on the part of local school committees toward the objective of desegregation. On June 21, 1974, Judge Garrity of the Federal District Court of Massachusetts made a ruling in the case of Morgan vs. Hennigan that essentially charged the Boston School Committee of engaging in racial segregation. This ruling and its aftermath would serve to fuel one of the prominent controversies embedded in our nation’s ongoing struggle for racial desegregation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Boston’s Busing Crisis

*Brief Introduction*

It should be noted that Boston was not the pioneer of busing students in an effort to rectify racial imbalance among its schools. Nor was Boston the first instance of serious opposition to such efforts. The issue of busing had been prevalent for several years prior to the drama of Boston’s crisis in the mid 1970’s. Regions of both northern and southern United States were actively busing students, although not without resistance from many parties including parents, school committees, and founded organizations, such as the National Council against Forced Busing.[[4]](#footnote-4) In fact, busing persisted during a time when it was explicitly opposed by national administrators, including the president. President Nixon at one point went on record to declare “I have consistently opposed the busing of our nation’s children to achieve racial balance, and I am opposed to the busing of children simply for the sake of busing.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Later, President Gerald Ford, who was president at the time of the Boston crisis, directly questioned Judge Garrity’s order. Ford noted, “The court decision in that case, in my judgment, was not the best solution to quality education in Boston. I have consistently opposed forced busing to achieve racial balance as a solution to quality education. And therefore I respectfully disagree with the judge’s order.”[[6]](#footnote-6) In light of such stern opposition, one might naturally ask upon what grounds the activity was ever proposed and, furthermore, justified in the first place.

The answer to such inquiry may perhaps be valid on a theoretical level. The simple predicament facing school districts, such as Boston’s, was that an enormous racial imbalance existed. Moreover, this was attributed to various dominating bases of segregation, which, as mentioned, was constitutionally wrong. Therefore, school districts essentially had little choice but to either strategically locate and build new schools, redraw districts, or simply “exchange” students between schools by bus to achieve a more tolerable racial balance. In Boston’s case, this meant that “non-white” enrollments in schools must not exceed 50 percent, in accordance with the 1965 state legislation. To make matters worse, the state was indeed following through on threats to withhold funding if such goal was not pursued. In 1971, $14 million in appropriations were withheld, and the notice was served that another $43 million would be withheld from the 1972 budget unless notable strives were made toward obeying the aforementioned goal.[[7]](#footnote-7) In short, busing became the answer for Boston’s schools. However, upon examining such an approach from a practical level, we find a plethora of evidence that suggests that the activity was ill-advised and perhaps even negligent.

*Negative Race Relationship Overshadowed Desegregation Efforts*

One key, and perhaps detrimental oversight of busing efforts regards the consensus, or lack of consensus, throughout the communities with respect to the importance of desegregation in and of itself. Certainly, many advocates of correcting the racial imbalance in Boston’s schools went on record to proclaim that it was “the only means for guaranteeing equal educational opportunities to all school children.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Many prominent organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, organized rallies in support of Boston’s busing efforts as they embraced the value of blacks and whites going to school and living together.[[9]](#footnote-9)

On the other hand, bitter racial prejudices were still largely present and visible in many sects of Boston. Many dominant attitudes within households and neighborhoods coincided with racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party. During the second week of the busing, for instance, David Duke, a Ku Klux Klan member, held a rally in Boston where he commented, “White people! White people! We are going to win a great victory in South Boston for the white race. The tide is beginning to turn against forced race mixing...The Federal Government is taking money out of your pockets to finance the production of thousands of little black bastards. The issue isn’t education. The real issue is Niggers!”[[10]](#footnote-10) Some residents, from both black and white communities, complained that the exchange of students would result in families of different races moving into and “ruining” their neighborhoods. Clearly, these prevailing attitudes should caution against forcing the mixture of these volatile racial perspectives.

Many people believed that busing was furthering the disparities between whites and blacks, particularly between the individuals of different socioeconomic classes. Despite its well-intentioned goals of desegregating, busing, for many, put different races in opposition to one another. Wally Thurston, a black gentleman, noted, “The government is just using this busing issue to pit the lower classes against each other.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Ione Malloy, an English teacher at South Boston High School during the desegregation efforts, kept a diary from 1974-1977. During one of her final exams, she allowed students to write about busing as an essay question. Her students’ responses are telling. Many of the students’ responses reveal their uncertainty that forcibly integrating their schools will result in better race relations. One white boy, among other things, noted that busing “puts the racial situation in trouble putting black against whites.”[[12]](#footnote-12) A white female student noted that forcibly integrating schools will only “ruin the kid’s lives” because “trying to make them be friends with other races is hard for some kids to adjust.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The busing policy provided a pretext to exercise negative racial views, and these negative race relations overshadowed the issue of desegregation as well as principled opposition of busing.

*Infringement on Personal Freedoms*

One common form of resistance to busing was the argument that forced busing was an encroachment on families’ and individuals’ freedom; in fact, many individuals who supported desegregation efforts rejected mandated busing as the means of achieving quality education because a forced policy, it was believed, was an infringement of freedom, especially the freedom of choice regarding education. One group in particular made a significant mark during the busing crisis: Restore Our Alienated Rights, more commonly referred to as ROAR. Led by Louise Day Hicks, a member of the Boston City Council and school board committee, ROAR was an anti-busing, largely parent, organization that argued that mandated busing was against the rights guaranteed under the Constitution.[[14]](#footnote-14) ROAR rallies often attacked Garrity’s busing policy on the grounds that it was violating personal freedoms regarding education. During one rally a member commented, “We are here protecting our children and our brother and sister’s children. They have the right to attend the school of their choice. They have the right to enjoy the freedoms of this land.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

Additionally, many people argued that forced busing disregarded the small communities and neighborhood ties that they had worked so hard to establish. Forced busing, they believed, disrupted their right to safely practice their distinct heritages and customs. Many of the neighborhoods in Boston were predominately one ethnicity; thus, they shared a common background. In Boston, neighborhoods were isolated into pockets of whites, Italians, blacks, Irish, and so forth, which many were willing to fight to keep contained. According to Daniel Haney, “These neighborhoods, proud and defensive, are the basic urban unit in Boston. Their residents share similar heritage, race, income, and outlook. There are the Italians in the North End and East Boston, the Irish and Charleston and South Boston, and the blacks in Roxbury and parts of Dorchester.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Forced busing, then, enticed a fear that heritage, family, and customs were being dismantled. One Charlestown resident reflected on the busing as “an intrusion on individual rights” and explained that residents “are worried about the fabric and peace” of their towns.[[17]](#footnote-17) Ray Herman, an administrator and part-time physical education instructor, believed that the loss of freedom, not forced busing, was the real issue. He explained, “…that’s not what gets most people about the busing...it’s the pushing people around. Telling a man, I don’t care that you’ve spent your life working to make the money to live in this one small block of one small community in the middle of this city. I don’t care that you want to live near the people you grew up with and your parents and maybe grandparents grew up with. I don’t care that you want to keep your children with their own kind so they can see how important it is for them to learn about their own kind, the history of their people and their neighborhood.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

A final issue regarding freedom is that local control and power was undercut by state and federal authorities. National polls conducted in 1975 revealed that the majority of both white and black citizens were opposed to busing. Furthermore, in the case of Boston’s schools, locally elected representatives and school governing committees were in firm opposition to busing their students. Nonetheless, these stances were largely ignored as busing was mandated by the Federal court.[[19]](#footnote-19) This deliberation does not reflect well on the system that is supposed to govern for the best interests of its people. On the contrary, it offers a prime example of how the government can evade the desires of its people.

*Busing Induced Violent Reactions*

The school year of 1974 marked perhaps the launch of elevated violence associated with the busing efforts. Although Mayor White declared at the time that “The vast majority of Boston citizens continue to subordinate their personal feelings for the general good and have complied peacefully with the law,” violence surely overshadowed any positive effects of the movement. [[20]](#footnote-20) Students fought each other in the classrooms, halls, and cafeterias. Buses carrying both white and black students were pelted with rocks or beaten and smashed by other heavy objects. Upon exiting the buses, many students were interviewed by local news companies. One black female student reported, “We went to school, everything was alright, but when we came back outside, it was all whites, you know. Old, young, little ones, teenagers. They started throwing rocks, so all the glass was busted out. And do you know it was a white man who was driving the bus? You know he stopped there and let them hit us with the rocks and stuff. He didn’t move. He stopped.”[[21]](#footnote-21) Gunshots were fired on several occasions toward law enforcement officials, students, and the general public. Many organized demonstrations, whether having intentions of violence or not, ultimately resulted in violent acts. Sadly, according to some sources, the worst acts of violence during the busing crisis went unreported as news and newspaper companies were reluctant to report issues fearing negative readership reactions. Sid Blumenthal reported, “*The Globe*, the major Boston newspaper, has been skittish about reporting much about these incidents...After a shotgun blast shattered some of its windows in apparent retaliation for its liberal policy, new bullet-proof panes were installed. In another attack, a *Globe* delivery truck was hijacked and dumped in Boston Harbor. The newspaper is reluctant to take a strong line for integration.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Violence was such a concern that heavy measures were made readily available to qualm violent outbreaks. In the second year of the busing policy, for instance, “police guards were quadrupled to a total of 2,100 around critical schools and bus routes...federal marshals and National Guardsmen were brought to Boston” and a “U.S. army paratroop division was made available.”[[23]](#footnote-23) Furthermore, “The Boston police [were] backed up by FBI agents, Justice Dept. lawyers, and 600 National Guardsmen waiting on alert in the city’s armories.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Many believed that if enforcement was not available, violence would ensue. One publication reported, “Many observers agree that if the police presence were less overwhelming in the Irish-American areas, there would be a repeat of stone throwings and demonstrations around schools and along bus routes that led to turmoil and injuries last year.”[[25]](#footnote-25) In addition to violence outside the schools, violence and tensions were also high inside the schools. Violence in schools was commonplace. For instance, on the week of December 10, 1974, a 17 year old male student, Michael Faith, was stabbed within South Boston High school, and, at Roslindale, 600 white students walked out after “a reported slapping incident between a black student and white student.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Fourteen days into the court ordered busing, one white student was suspended at South Boston High after throwing a chair at a group of black students.[[27]](#footnote-27) As the 1975 school year drew closer, tensions did not desist. In fact, even Judge Garrity spoke of intentions to close two of Boston’s high schools, which were greatly impacted by the exchange of students via busing, due to an anticipation of potential mass violence. This ironically came shortly after publicly announcing his plan to increase busing efforts the following school year.[[28]](#footnote-28)

*Increase in Boston’s White Flight Phenomenon*

Although Boston had been seeing a steady decline in its student population, the busing policy sped up Boston’s white flight phenomenon, which helped create concentrated pockets of poverty, resources, and races. In the years preceding the busing policy, from 1964-1974, the Boston public school had an average of 1,710 students drop out per year.[[29]](#footnote-29) The number of white dropouts rose significantly during the first few years of busing. During the 1974-75 school year 8,656 white students dropped out, from 1975-76 3,530 white students dropped out, and from 1976-77 6,846 students dropped out.[[30]](#footnote-30) A steady decline in white students persisted after the busing policy was implemented. By 1975, Boston’s public schools, according to some sources, had lost nearly a third of its white population.[[31]](#footnote-31) In 1974, Boston’s public schools were comprised of 60 percent white students; as of 2004, however, 82 percent of the student body was students of color.[[32]](#footnote-32) Many parents, reluctant to uproot their families, enrolled their students in private or parochial schools to avoid the busing policy. As one newspaper described it, “White flight under the public school desegregation in Boston may be taking another form.”[[33]](#footnote-33) To cite a common example, “Paul Quatromoni and his wife are among...an undetermined number of white families who have removed their children from the public schools to the parochial system.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Many private neighborhood schools and academies were also established; thus, families were able to enroll their children into these private schools where forced busing was not an issue. One sociologist, James Coleman, argued that white flight would be accelerated in Boston by 14 percent over normal rates as a result of the busing policy.[[35]](#footnote-35)

*Counterproductive Nature of Busing*

The result of busing was counterproductive as many students’ education was discontinued, either voluntarily or begrudgingly, for various reasons, including out of protest or fear. During the first years of Garrity’s orders, anti-busing rallies and sit-outs were common. Both black and white students would skip school in protest. On Tuesday, October 28, 1975, South Boston experienced one of its first large anti-busing rallies. On that day, over 7,000 protesters marched through South Boston, and nearly all the white students skipped school. That day, only three of the 785 white students enrolled showed up to South Boston High School.[[36]](#footnote-36) Later that year, on Tuesday, December 9, the day Garrity placed South Boston under federal control, which came to be known as “Black Tuesday,” only 18 white students showed up at South Boston High School; many who did show up only did so because they were on the basketball team and would have to miss the game if they skipped school.[[37]](#footnote-37) School closings after violent reactions were frequent. As one news report explains, “A new outburst at South Boston High School has led officials to close all schools in the area for the rest of the week in hopes a cooling off period will relieve racial tensions.”[[38]](#footnote-38) As a result of the violence, many parents were reluctant to send their children to school, and many students felt uncomfortable and unsafe in their school. Upon exiting school after the first day of the desegregation plan, one white student from Hyde Park High noted, “I doubt I’m coming back because I can’t sit here and wonder whether I’m going to get killed walking down the hall. First day of school I see kids with switchblades. You think I’m coming back to this?”[[39]](#footnote-39) Another white sophomore female student detailed her fears in her diary: “Today I started in a new school, South Boston High...it’s kind of scary...When I first came in I had to go through a metal detector. I had to take everything out of my pockets...Today I saw two fights.”[[40]](#footnote-40)

Throughout Boston, school attendance numbers were sporadic but nearly always low, especially during the beginning of the school years. On some days, schools had less than 25 percent of the student population in attendance, especially during times of rioting, rallies, and protest.[[41]](#footnote-41) During the first week of the second year of the busing, attendance in schools rose steadily from about 50 percent student attendance to wavering around 75 percent student attendance. One newspaper reported that attendance on the seventh day of classes had rose to 73.5 percent, up from the first day of classes at 59.2 percent attendance.[[42]](#footnote-42) However, it is important to note that those statistics are somewhat skewed as they contain the attendance figures for kindergarten attendance, which had a 93.3 percent attendance. Kindergarten was not affected by the busing policy. In her diary, South Boston High English teacher Ione Malloy presents her attendance record for her sophomore homeroom class. Malloy had 35 students assigned to her homeroom, of which 13 never enrolled.[[43]](#footnote-43) Furthermore, she divides students into categories according to gender and race and documents individual student’s attendance record. A few attendance records stand out: one white girl was present only 6 days out of a possible 178, one black girl was present 48 days, one Spanish student was present only 2 days, and one white boy was present 44 days, all out of a possible 178 days.[[44]](#footnote-44) The overall spread of attendances is profound. The range of absences ranges from 172 to 5, while the range of attendances ranges from 0 to 173; additionally, the number of tardies ranges from 0 to 72.[[45]](#footnote-45) Not only did the busing policy entice negative race relations and violence, the policy was injurious to students’ education, as many were not showing up to classes either in fear or in protest.

Conclusion

All in all, busing students in an effort toward racial integration, as in the case of Boston’s schools, is a highly flawed endeavor. First of all, it assumes that communities will naturally embrace the enterprise, without considering the underlying ideologies these communities might have which directly conflict with the ultimate aim. Busing also indicates an assumption that integration is merely about populations and proportions in terms of numbers. Busing was perhaps a reckless decision by the court, but this notion is not restricted only to hindsight. For instance, one editor amidst the era declares of busing that “it was ordered by the courts, not as the ideal solution to the problem of equality of education, but because school authorities were doing nothing to achieve that equality.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Granted, Boston, as with every other community of this nation, was faced with a constitutional protocol of racial equality. Nevertheless, in consideration of our evidence, forced busing should not have been a justifiable option toward achieving that respective goal in Boston, Massachusetts.

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