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BUSING FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION: THE DEBATE ON SELECTED ISSUES

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BUSING FOR SCHOOL DESEGREGATION: THE DEBATE ON SELECTED ISSUES

Reliance on racial balance is wasteful because it deprives courts and government civil rights agencies of the flexibility needed to formulate viable educational remedies. The absence of such alternative remedies condemns thousands of black children to remain in racially isolated and educationally bankrupt schools. Thousands of others are bused to schools miles from their homes in total disregard of the expressed preferences of their parents.

Derrick A. Bell, Jr. "A Reassessment of Racial Balance Remedies--I." Phi Delta Kappan. November 1980. p. 177.

The issue is not whether or not to bus, but whether or not to integrate, for there is no way to achieve integration except by busing.

John A. Finger, Jr. "Why Busing Plans Work." School Desegregation: Shadow and Substance. Ed. by Florence Hamlish Levinsohn and Benjamin Drake Wright. 1976. p. 58.

This paper explores selected questions involving the busing of elementary and secondary school students for desegregation. On each of the selected questions a general analysis of the issue involved is presented, followed by two subsections entitled A Critic's Position and An Advocate's Position. In these subsections, an attempt is made to show how a critic of busing for desegregation and an advocate of such busing might fashion arguments on this issue in opposition to, or in support of, busing. The five questions addressed below are:

(1) Do students experience any changes in their levels of academic achievement when moved from a segregated school to a desegregated school?

(2) Does busing cause "white flight" and what are its implications?

(3) What are the financial costs associated with busing for school desegregation?

(4) Are there alternatives to busing?

(5) What do the polls say about public opinion on busing students for desegregation purposes?

THE QUESTIONS

(1) Do students experience any changes in their levels of academic achievement when moved from a segregated school to a desegregated school?

The literature on the impact of desegregated schools on student achievement levels has yielded at least one general conclusion, that the academic achievement of white students in such settings seldom suffers. A principal area of ambiguity remains—the impact of school desegregation on black students. Apparently, the specific circumstances of the desegregation plan will influence the academic outcomes for black students. Analysis of desegregation in the early grades and analysis of desegregated settings in their second rather than initial year seem to be more likely to find achievement gains. The literature is divided on the impact associated with mandatory student reassignment. In general, the studies of specific desegregation activities and their impact on student achievement suffer from a variety of methodological shortcomings, limiting the reliability of some of the conclusions drawn from them. Nevertheless, because the studies reach conclusions that fall across a broad spectrum, researchers and policy makers alike find support for different positions on the impact of desegregation. Perhaps the most important conclusion to be drawn from these studies and one which recognizes their weaknesses, is that they do not prove desegregation, even that undertaken by mandate, to be a success or a failure in every instance, in terms of its effects on pupil achievement.

A CRITIC'S POSITION

The ambiguity of the results from research on the academic impact of school desegregation undercuts a primary reason for undertaking school desegregation. The costs of busing for desegregation purposes appear to be far in excess of any educational gains enjoyed by black students in desegregated settings.

Indeed, some who have extensively reviewed the various studies of black academic achievement find that because the record fails to support the underlying rationales for school busing, alternative approaches and remedies are in order. One study of the literature concluded the following.

Thus, the present state of research concerning the underlying factors of black students' classroom performance is one in which conventional theories of achievement motivation may not adequately predict or explain the academic achievement of black students. Nevertheless, the current policy of transferring black students from predominantly black to predominantly white schools is based upon the assumption that somehow blacks will adopt the achievement-related values of white students and thereby increase their academic performance. The dearth of strong experimental evidence in favor of the assumption . . . suggests that such massive transfers of students within our school systems may not be the best means for improving black student achievement.

Laurence A. Bradley and Gifford W. Bradley.
 "The Academic Achievement of Black Students
 in Desegregated Schools: A Critical Review."
Review of Educational Research. Summer 1977.

Derrick Bell has considered the policy of requiring racial balance in the schools as the primary tool for achieving equal education opportunity and found it to be "obsolete." ("A Reassessment of Racial Balance Remedies--I." Phi Delta Kappan. November 1980. p. 177.) He reaches this conclusion, in part, because the racial balance goal implicitly rejects the idea that predominantly

black schools can offer equal educational opportunity and because the research on the educational impact of desegregation is contradictory. He concludes:

[T]he available social science research fails even to show a relationship between conventional resources and achievement, and efforts to ascertain whether desegregation has either a positive or negative influence have led to inconsistent conclusions or none at all. Therefore, a racial balance policy, whether voluntarily adopted or court ordered, is an insufficient and sometimes inappropriate response to the present inequity that characterizes public instruction for black children. (p. 179.)

AN ADVOCATE'S POSITION

Despite some ambiguity about the academic results achieved from school desegregation, there is evidence that black students' achievement can improve in desegregated schools and that white students' achievement levels rarely suffer.

Crain and Mahard undertook an analysis of the studies of achievement test performance in settings where desegregation was intentional (as opposed to desegregation occurring when children from racially mixed neighborhoods attend their neighborhood schools). (Robert L. Crain and Rita E. Mahard. "Desegregation and Black Achievement: A Review of the Research." Law and Contemporary Problems. Summer 1978.). They concluded:

The best studies of the effects of school desegregation on the achievement of black students have in common a recognition of an important fact about desegregation—that desegregation is not a laboratory-controlled experiment that is identical in Jacksonville, Florida and in Berkeley, California. Every case is different, and identical results should not be expected. Thus, one answer to the question, What is the effect of desegregation on achievement? is that sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. But this is true of any intervention. Can anything more be said? The answer seems to be yes, but it is important to frame the question carefully. If the question is, Has desegregation resulted in improved achievement for blacks? the answer hardly needs study, since desegregation has resulted in the closing of many inadequate segregated schools in both the North and the South. If the question is, Will desegregation in the future improve the achievement of black students? the answer seems to be yes, with perhaps some reservations. (pp. 47-48.)

(2) Does busing cause "white flight" (movement of white children out of the public school system) and what are its implications?

There appears to be a consensus developing around the proposition that school desegregation, particularly when mandatory busing is involved, can lead to accelerated rates of white flight from desegregating school districts. High rates of increase need not invariably occur and are less likely to occur when the desegregating district has a relatively small black enrollment, when economic differences between the families of the black and white students are limited, and when predominantly white school districts not undergoing desegregation are not readily accessible to the white families in the desegregating district. In addition, white flight is not caused solely by busing for desegregation. Longstanding patterns of white movement out of urban areas have been identified as families are attracted to the suburbs for a variety of reasons. Also, a declining white birth rate reduces white enrollment, although not involving any movement of families.

A remaining issue subject to debate is the duration of the accelerated white flight. Some contend it lasts for several years after implementation of the desegregation plan. Others argue for a more limited impact.

A CRITIC'S POSITION

The busing of students for desegregation can generate an exodus of white students from the public school system, ironically leading to the resegregation of the system in question. Despite arguments that other factors contribute to white flight, the extent to which mandatory school desegregation increases that flight has been shown in various studies to be dramatic.

David Armor analyzed white flight, in part, by using demographic projections to calculate anticipated losses of white students without the influence of school desegregation plans and comparing those anticipated losses to actual losses when desegregation plans were implemented. (White Flight, Demographic Transition, and the Future of School Desegregation. August 1978. The Rand Paper Series.) He found that "the extra white losses caused by court-ordered mandatory desegregation are very substantial, in most cases amounting to over half of all white losses over periods of six to eight years." (p. 41) In addition, Armor concluded that the white flight effect "tends to happen only when significant numbers of students are mandatorily reassigned (or "bused"), and especially when white students are reassigned to formerly minority schools. This situation develops most in court-ordered cases, . . . Therefore court-ordered mandatory plans, rather than desegregation per se, have been the primary causes of accelerated white flight in desegregating school districts." (pp. 40-41)

Statistics for various school districts undergoing court-ordered desegregation involving some degree of busing show substantial declines in white enrollment. The Los Angeles Times reported that between the fall of 1979 and the fall of 1980 (when the Los Angeles desegregation plan was extended to more grades than before), white enrollment in the Los Angeles school district dropped by 18,515 students or 12.8 percent. Minority enrollment grew by 1.2

percent. (Los Angeles Times, October 2, 1980.) St. Louis offers an example of significant white enrollment losses between 1979 and 1980 (when mandatory reassignment of some students began). In the fall of 1979, non-black enrollment was 16,444. By the fall of 1980 that number had dropped to 13,224, a loss of 21 percent. (Data provided by analyst on the staff of the St. Louis School Board.)

AN ADVOCATE'S POSITION

Although the movement of white students out of desegregating school systems is probably exacerbated by busing, busing is not the sole cause of this flight and its effects are only temporary. White flight does occur but its dimensions depend upon a variety of factors.

Christine Rossell has found that the impact of school desegregation on white flight may not last much beyond the implementation year for some districts, particularly those with less than 35 percent black enrollment implementing the "average two-way assignment plan." ("White Flight: Pros and Cons." Social Policy. November/December 1978.) This latter group of districts apparently experiences less white enrollment loss during the post-implementation years than comparable districts not undergoing desegregation. Thus, desegregation may well work to stem white flight, in general, over time.

One aspect of this different experience of white flight among school districts is that metropolitan-wide or county-wide desegregation plans lead to less white flight. One reason is the elimination of nearby localities to which a family can move to avoid having its children reassigned to desegregating schools. One implication of this finding was explored by Diana Pearce in her study "Breaking Down Barriers: New Evidence on the Impact of Metropolitan School Desegregation on Housing Patterns" (Center for National Policy Review.

The Catholic University of America. November 1980.) She showed in that study that metropolitan-wide school desegregation was associated with housing desegregation. As a result, desegregation plans involving larger geographical areas than inner-city school districts might well lead to a diminished need for busing in the future as integrated housing patterns develop.

Thus white flight need not be the fatal flaw in desegregation planning. It does occur, but under certain conditions is limited in its extent and duration. More extensive desegregation plans are likely to control this white flight and may lead to more permanent solutions by helping to generate desegregated housing patterns.

(3) What are the financial costs associated with busing for school desegregation?

It is very difficult to procure reliable data on the costs of school desegregation plans. Particularly when a school district is involved in litigation, cost estimates become arguments used to buttress one position or another. Identifying precisely which costs arise solely from the desegregation, or, for that matter, from the limited act of moving reassigned students, is highly complex. Nevertheless, desegregation costs apparently can be significant for specific school districts and under specific circumstances. The one general analysis of these costs reached the conclusions presented above. (David L. Colton. "Urban School Desegregation Costs. Part I. Case Studies." Center for Educational Field Studies. Washington University. 1977.) The absence of other general analyses on this issue applicable nationwide may be due to the difficulties associated with this kind of analysis.

A CRITIC'S POSITION

Pupil transportation plans for desegregation often carry with them a financial cost which may be substantial and, in some cases, impose a burden on school districts already troubled financially. In addition, busing consumes significant quantities of much needed gasoline.

Although precise cost information on a national basis for busing for desegregation is not currently available, one study of seven school districts with desegregation plans involving pupil transportation found increased costs in five of them.

In summary, to accommodate school desegregation and a rule change requiring the transportation of city students, Charlotte, North Carolina, doubled its bus riding population up to 37,357 at a cost of \$612,128. In the last stage of Racine's voluntary desegregation plan an additional 1,400 students were transported at a cost of \$138,000. Dallas has had two orders; one requiring 7,000 students to be transported for desegregation, the other 18,000 students. The increase in costs has been about \$500,000 each year. In Jefferson County, the merger with Louisville schools and school desegregation required about 6,000 more students to be transported. The cost of transportation doubled from \$3.5 million to \$7.2 million. While the increase in number of bus riders was small, the number of miles traveled just about doubled, from 27,000 daily to 53,000 daily. In Denver almost 15,000 more students were riding buses the first year after desegregation and another 1,000 the second year. During the 2-year period the cost for transportation rose \$2.6 million. In Dayton, 5,000 more students are riding buses after desegregation, and the district is projecting that transportation costs will drop by \$500,000. Before and after cost figures were not available from Pasadena.

Alanson A. Van Fleet. "Student Transportation Costs Following Desegregation." Integrated Education. December 1977. p. 77.

Figures for the increased use of gasoline for busing children in selected North Carolina counties under some form of court-ordered desegregation show that between 1969-70 and 1977-78, gasoline consumption at least doubled and in one case grew six-fold. (Figures presented by Senator Helms, Congressional Record, June 5, 1979. p. S6911.)

AN ADVOCATE'S POSITION

At least two facets of the cost issue should be borne in mind. First, the percentage of U.S. school children in fact bused for desegregation is relatively small. Second, the weighing of the benefits of busing against its financial costs is tantamount to weighing the desirability of attaining a particular constitutionally-required social goal, desegregated schooling, against its financial costs.

With regard to the nationwide dimensions of busing, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights has reported:

Restructuring [of school districts] often requires additional busing of students, but the increase is substantially less than is popularly believed. Nationally, slightly more than 50 percent of all school children are bused to school, and of this percentage less than 7 percent are bused for the purpose of school desegregation.

Fulfilling the Letter and Spirit of the Law:
Desegregation of the Nation's Public Schools.
August 1976. p. 202.

The question of costs is thus relevant for a limited number of school districts in particular circumstances.

Indeed, not all districts undergoing desegregation face high costs. For example, Colton's study of school desegregation costs found that as of 1977 the Milwaukee desegregation costs had apparently been totally supported by State and Federal revenues.

Christine Rossell has written that "it is quite clear that the standard by which one evaluates the cost effectiveness of a policy will depend on the value placed on the goal. . . . For those of us who feel school desegregation is a matter of 'simple justice,' it can be deemed effective if there are any positive impacts at all. . . . In other words, there are some policies which have such great intrinsic value that the costs are not highly relevant." ("White Flight:

Pros and Cons." p. 50.) Rejecting a social goal or a tool to achieve that goal simply because the short-term financial costs are steep is likely to undervalue the true social benefits intended to be gained from achieving the goal, and may overlook long-term financial gains that will accrue. School desegregation and busing are such a social goal and tool. Indeed, the Supreme Court in the Brown decision (347 U.S. 483) found that segregated educational facilities deprived children of the equal protection of the laws under the 14th amendment to the Constitution. Such a finding cannot be weighed by the financial costs incumbent upon its implementation.

(4) Are there alternatives to busing?

Busing of students is not the only tool that has been used in attempts to desegregate school systems. Other techniques can be grouped by whether they rely on voluntary responses from students and parents or whether they are mandatory. Voluntary techniques can be part of mandated desegregation plans. Also, busing is a necessary component of some of the techniques described below.

Voluntary techniques include the following:

- open enrollment plans (also known as "freedom of choice" plans--students can attend the school they and their parents choose);
- majority to minority transfers (students of majority race at one school are permitted to transfer to schools where they will be in the minority);
- magnet schools (schools are established with special programs and curricula designed to attract students of all races from throughout a school system).

Mandatory techniques include the following:

- neighborhood attendance policies (students attend the schools in their neighborhoods or those closest to their homes, rather than being required to attend more distant segregated schools);
- redrawn attendance zones (schools' grade structures remain intact but the zones from which they draw students are adjusted);

- paired or grouped schools (schools predominantly serving different races are assigned the same attendance zones but each school serves a different cluster of grade levels);
- modified feeder patterns (lower schools of predominantly different races serve as feeder schools to the same upper level school); and
- new school construction (the selection of construction sites is influenced by desegregation concerns).

Not all of the techniques listed above have fared equally well under judicial scrutiny. Presently, desegregation plans for districts practicing de jure segregation or still evincing the vestiges of such school segregation are not likely to survive judicial challenge if they are based on freedom of choice plans or neighborhood attendance policies.

A CRITIC'S POSITION

The transportation of students, per se, does not address the important issue of educational quality for both black and white students. In fact, the polarizing nature of busing plans and their requisite expense may deflect attention and energy from this issue. Improving the quality of the schools may well serve to desegregate those schools and their neighborhoods—voluntarily, more permanently and with less tension—than is possible with pupil reassignment. Even if it does not, it may provide more equal educational opportunity to black students.

In some districts, the desegregation of the schools has not become a principal objective of either the white or black communities. David L. Kirp, in analyzing the history of the Oakland (California) school system over the past two decades, found that the issue of desegregation was handled politically within the district and was not taken into the courts. "As a result, race and schooling politics in Oakland—including current disinterest in desegregation—reflect the

popular will as well as any politically derived solution may be said to do so." ("Race, Schooling, and Interest Politics: The Oakland Story." School Review. August 1979. p. 307.) The outcome was largely a "reallocation of money and power within the school system secur[ing] for Oakland's black community a measure of distributive justice." The mixing of students of different races was not a goal. Kirp suggests that other urban school districts are seeking to improve their educational facilities, increase minority hiring and develop magnet schools instead of attempting to mandatorily desegregate student enrollment.

Apparently, a similar outcome was reached in Atlanta, Georgia.

The theory of Atlanta's educational leaders is that equal educational opportunity can be achieved through high quality education. If they are right, and if they can create the kind of productive, effective schools that all parents want, the system could become a showplace for urban American schools and a magnet pulling back the children of those who fled the city during the past two decades.

Diane Ravitch. "The 'White Flight' Controversy." Public Interest. Spring 1978. p. 149.

The alternatives to mandatory busing for desegregation include the development of magnet schools (schools established with special programs and curricula designed to attract students of all races), neighborhood attendance policies coupled with desegregation of residential housing, and majority to minority transfers (students of majority race at one school are permitted to transfer to schools where they will be in the minority).

David Armor has argued, based on his analysis of white flight, that:

[A] voluntary [desegregation] program eliminates the inevitable social costs of programs which are forced upon an unwilling and protesting public. Aside from the direct costs in the form of white flight, it is quite possible that mandatory busing has already added to the erosion of confidence in public education. . . . Given this climate of opinion, voluntary desegregation programs not only offer more enrollment stability; they may also help to stop this unfortunate decline in support for the public schools."

Armor. White Flight, Demographic Transition, and the Future of School Desegregation. p. 47.

AN ADVOCATE'S POSITION

Busing is, in most cases, the only remedy that can successfully desegregate schools. Desegregated housing that would permit neighborhood school assignments is unlikely to be a reality in the near future. Indeed, some would argue that desegregated schools are a prerequisite for the achievement of residential desegregation.

The use of magnet schools touted as a way to voluntarily desegregate schools is actually limited in its ability to achieve desegregation. One analyst concluded after studying magnet schools that "one or two, or even several magnet schools, no matter how racially balanced their individual student populations, are not sufficient to bring about district-wide desegregation."

(Constancia Warren. "The Magnet School Boom: Implications for Desegregation." Equal Opportunity Review. Spring 1978. p.2.) Magnet schools can be internally segregated; they may fail to attract enough volunteers from a particular race, thereby requiring use of racially-sensitive devices that may be less than voluntary; they may diminish support and resources given to desegregating non-magnet schools.

With regard to relying on integration of housing to yield desegregated schools, Gary Orfield has written:

It is important to remember that school and housing policies have reciprocal effects. School segregation is often caused by housing policies, and in the long term stable housing integration may greatly ease school integration. Without school integration, on the other hand, it is extremely difficult to stabilize housing integration unless the minority population is relatively small or the white population can afford private schools.

Must We Bus? The Brookings Institution.
1978. p. 99.

(5) What do the polls say about public opinion on busing students for desegregation purposes?

Recently conducted national opinion polls show that approximately three-quarters of those questioned responded negatively when asked their opinion of school busing for desegregation. (See The Los Angeles Times Poll of November 9-13, 1980; The Gallup Poll released February 5, 1981; and The Harris Survey released March 26, 1981.) When racial breakdowns are available, it is evident that black respondents are more likely to respond favorably than whites when asked their opinion of busing for school desegregation. For example, The Gallup Poll (February 5, 1981) asked, "Do you favor or oppose busing children to achieve a better racial balance in the schools?" Whites said they opposed by 78 percent to 17 percent; whereas blacks said they favored busing by 60 percent to 30 percent.

The polls have also shown a growing acceptance of desegregated schooling. The Gallup Poll (February 5, 1981) found that only 5 percent of its respondents (white parents) said they would object to sending their children to a school with a "few" blacks; 23 percent said they would object if the school's enrollment was as high as one-half; and 45 percent had no objection regardless of the level of black enrollment. In 1958, Gallup found only 32 percent of its respondents saying they would have no objection to sending their children to schools more than half black in enrollment.

For determining the opinions of families with direct experience with busing for desegregation there is relatively little public opinion data available. The Harris Survey (March 26, 1981) found that 19 percent of its respondents said their children had been "picked up by bus to go to a school with children of other races." Of that group, 54 percent said the experience with such busing had been very satisfactory, 33 percent said it had been partly satisfactory, and 11 percent said it had not been satisfactory.

A CRITIC'S POSITION

Poll results show widespread opposition to busing, rendering the successful implementation of desegregation plans relying on that remedy highly unlikely. The polls also show that opposition to busing is to the means being used, not the end sought. Although three-quarters of the people oppose busing, nearly half of all white parents have no objection to sending their children to schools where the majority of students are black. In addition, black support for busing should be questioned. A Newsweek Poll, conducted by the Gallup Organization between February 14 and 23, 1981, asked a sample of black adults-- "Has school busing for integration been helpful to black children on balance-- or has it caused more difficulties than it is worth?" Half of those polled chose the second response, that busing caused more difficulties than it was worth.

Polls showing acceptance of busing after exposure to it should be carefully scrutinized. In fact, it is doubtful whether the group answering "yes" to the Harris Survey (March 26, 1981) question on whether their children had been "picked up by bus to go to a school with children of other races" can be accurately described as having been part of an effort to achieve racial balance. Some individuals might not have known why their children were riding buses; indeed, the question need not be read as limiting itself to bus rides that were part of a plan or program of desegregation. The precise circumstances under which the child is riding the bus should make a difference in how individuals respond and it is not clear that the question is more likely to generate a positive response from some parents as opposed to others.

In general, opposition to busing coupled with support for desegregated schooling means that alternative remedies to desegregate schools can be very successful if they tap the underlying approval of desegregated schooling without raising the fears of school busing.

AN ADVOCATE'S POSITION

Results such as those shown by the Harris Survey (March 26, 1981), regardless of some possible problems with the phrasing of its questions, indicate that exposure to busing for desegregation, particularly over a period of time, raises the level of individuals' acceptance of busing. Consider, for example, the Gallup Poll (February 5, 1981) which shows that only 5 percent of the white parents would object to sending their children schools where a few children are black. This percentage also applied to parents from the South, although in a 1963 Gallup study apparently 60 percent of those parents in the South indicated they would object. The use of busing to achieve desegregation has been more extensively undertaken in the South and for a longer period of time than in the rest of the Nation, suggesting that exposure to busing and its results can lead to greater acceptance of desegregated schooling. It would be ironic to reject the device that helped bring about this acceptance.

The exact relationship between opposition to busing for desegregation and support for desegregated schooling is difficult to identify. Over half of the children in this country ride buses to school every day without protest. It is only when the bus ride is part of a desegregation plan that opposition is mounted. It may well be that the end (desegregated schooling) is objected to, although the bus is the more visible target and the one toward which it is more socially acceptable to voice opposition.

In the final analysis, those individuals who have experienced busing appear to be more supportive than those who have not. Nevertheless, one should not let public opinion dictate whether and how social objectives are to be achieved. The courts in particular must work to uphold the law, regardless of the current position of public opinion. Opposition to busing should cause policy makers to exercise great care in devising desegregation plans, not preclude our using an effective tool.