WHITE FLIGHT

Did busing hasten white flight and weaken the Civil Rights movement?

Viewpoint: Yes, busing hastened white flight from urban areas and weakened some Civil Rights gains by essentially resegregating city schools.

Viewpoint: No, busing of schoolchildren was an effective way to correct racial discrimination in public education.

It could be called a tale of two cities. In 1970 a federal district judge in Charlotte, North Carolina, found that the school board had maintained a racially segregated system of education. He ordered the board to correct the situation, and though there was tremendous opposition to busing of children, the schools were integrated. Twenty years later, when it was proposed that the judge's assignment plan was no longer necessary, the citizens of Charlotte, white and black, resisted attempts to end it. These citizens, many of whom had grown up and been educated in Charlotte-Mecklenburg's integrated schools, think the system works.

In 1974 a federal district judge in Boston, Massachusetts, found that the school board there had also maintained a racially segregated system of education. He ordered the schools integrated, and the violent opposition to his order left the city even more divided than it had been. Twenty years later the local paper, which had supported Judge W. Arthur Garrity Jr.'s order, proposed a public forum to debate the busing issue. But no one was willing to defend it publicly. Boston's public schools are overwhelmingly black, more segregated than they were in 1974, and both blacks and whites have fled the system. Garrity, who wrote the original decision, in 1999 overturned the school department's integration plan for Boston Latin School, because it was too rigid. Parents throughout the district, and throughout Massachusetts, are currently challenging school-assignment plans that look only at race.

What happened? Why the difference? In these two essays, David I. Finnegan and Robert J. Allison look at busing and try to come to terms with this complicated topic. Finnegan is uniquely qualified to comment on the Boston controversy. As a parent of children in the Boston public schools in the early 1970s, Finnegan became active in a group determined to save the system from itself. He was elected to the Boston School Committee in 1975, at the height of the controversy, and served as its president for the next four years. He has since been active promoting racial understanding in the city. Allison, now a constitutional scholar, was a student in the Pinellas County, Florida, schools that were peacefully integrated by court order in 1971. He now lives in South Boston, the center of antibusing sentiment in the 1970s.

Finnegan and Allison are both classic liberals. They believe in a just society and that the state has a role in achieving justice. This debate was one of the most violent and ugly political controversies of the twentieth century. It has not been entirely resolved, and the verdict of history perhaps will never be unanimous.
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No aspect of the Civil Rights movement caused more protracted opposition than busing to achieve integration in the public schools. One observer called it “a domestic Vietnam.” As bitter and violent as the events of the 1960s may have been, a substantial majority of Americans supported the goals of equal opportunity and an end to legal segregation. Part of this situation could be explained by the regional context of the battleground. Legal segregation was confined to the Southern states of the old Confederacy. By 1970 the ten-state region was considered out of step with the rest of the country, which was not measurably impacted by federal enforcement policies. Until busing was ordered for the nation, the South was seen as virtually alone in its opposition to civil rights.

In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. The doctrine of “separate but equal” was dead, and all laws requiring segregation by any method were a denial of the equal-protection clause. The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas case impacted the states of Kansas, South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware. The case contained an original finding: it accepted psychological evidence of the harmful nature of segregation to the self-esteem of black children and, accordingly, found racially segregated schools unconstitutional without regard to the intent of the local school board. With Brown, the high court provided a blueprint for future application of desegregation to northern cities with large minority populations, which invariably lived in residentially segregated neighborhoods. After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act these neighborhoods and their local schools were on a collision course with Brown, a collision almost totally unanticipated by the residents.

In 1968 the Supreme Court outlined the new direction in Green v. School Board of New Kent County. The Court struck down a school-choice plan on grounds that it was not the most effective remedy to bring about integration. Not only was the school system required to desegregate, it was obligated to employ a method most likely to produce integration. In the same year, the Court addressed the effect of residential segregation in Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District represented the typical residential pattern in America. Whites predominated in suburbia; blacks were largely residents of the central cities. The district in Swann required massive busing to achieve racial balance. The neighborhood school was effectively swept aside, and cases following Swann henceforth were characterized by arguments over who would bear the brunt of busing. That is, the burden of busing could not adversely affect blacks. Public schools were now subject to redistricting by the federal Court, a move that severely underestimated parental attachment to the neighborhood school.

The residential pattern of Swann revealed an Achilles heel of the Court’s remedies. How would the Court implement integration if their prescription were to accelerate the movement of white families to suburbia, a demographic pattern that had been clearly identified since the 1950s? Charlotte shared a school district with its suburb of Mecklenburg, but this situation was exceptional. Boston, New York, Denver, and Detroit were the norm—separate school districts for suburban and inner-city areas.

Strategists with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were well aware of the developing difficulty and sought to reduce the potential impact of “white flight” by enlarging the scope of the integration orders. Under this approach whites in suburbia would be annexed to central cities for purposes of racial balance. In 1974 the Supreme Court, in Milliken v. Bradley, rejected the “metropolitan” approach on grounds that only the offending school district was subject to a racial-balance remedy. The Court’s earlier embrace of the harmful effects of segregation on blacks was effectively set aside, and henceforth only urban public-school systems would be subject to desegregation mandates, while white suburbs would remain exempt. The Milliken strategy had backfired. Instead of creating a pool of students to ensure racial balance, the effect was to guarantee that those who moved from the city were in no danger of losing their neighborhood schools. White flight of middle-class families to suburbia did more than defeat efforts toward integration; it left poorer whites, who were unable to afford a suburban home, bitter and disillusioned. Cities such as Boston and Denver lost the moderating influence of their once-powerful middle class, and poor people, black and white, were left to face the new reality through a devastating admixture of fear and resentment. To a climate already infected with racism came the insidious sentiments of class and conflict characterized by envy and hatred. By 1974 Boston and Denver were suffering the effects of this terrible alchemy.

“White flight” is a phrase used to describe the large-scale movement of whites from urban
school systems to suburban or private-school systems in order to avoid the effects of school busing to achieve integration. There are two schools of thought on the subject: one supports the above stated definition; the other, while acknowledging the trend of whites to suburbia, denies its causal link to school integration, arguing instead that a pattern of white migration pre-existed the busing controversy by decades and accelerated, owing to economic growth. To one it was a largely unnatural event directly linked to busing and civil unrest; to the other, it reflected a natural tendency of affluent people to seek a better life in a newer, different setting.

While a pattern of affluent people "moving up" to suburbia had developed as far back as the 1930s, it simply cannot explain the dramatic exodus of white families from American cities that were subject to school-integration orders. Attempts to explain this demographic phenomenon as an extension of the suburban movement of the 1960s ignores the history of the 1970s, particularly that of Boston and Denver, which became poster children of the busing controversy. Efforts to reconcile the catastrophic effects of busing in these two communities with the earlier, modest migration spurred by Federal Housing Authority (FHA) mortgages and highway programs, fail to answer the statistical evidence of white flight. Not only did whites leave urban schools precipitously in cities undergoing desegregation, but families with children under age eighteen departed urban centers in numbers that were nothing short of alarming.

As many as one hundred school districts implemented desegregation plans between 1970 and 1985. Nowhere can one find substantial evidence that busing enhanced racial integration. On the contrary, the major cities are a testament to the opposite: there was increasing racial isolation. Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Baltimore all have substantially fewer white students today than before desegregation and considerably more racial isolation.

No city encountered more violent disruption concerning the desegregation of schools than Boston. Once considered the "Athens of America," Boston shocked the nation with its violent reaction to the 1974 federal court order to bus students. Parent groups throughout the city waged a five-year battle to keep their children in neighborhood schools. Every known method of opposition, from boycotting schools to stoning buses carrying black children, was employed to combat the busing order. By 1979 Boston's public schools had lost 35 percent of its student body: 70 percent of its white students and 45 percent of its families with school-age children. Almost all of the out-migration was the white middle class, leaving the school system to poor blacks and whites who remained subject to racial-balance orders until the year 2000. In the five years preceding busing, Boston experienced a drop in white enrollment of 10 percent: 72,000 to 64,000. In the ensuing five years, fully 70 percent of whites left the schools. These statistics present compelling evidence of the acceleration of white flight, clearly establishing busing as the principal cause.

Further analysis of population figures reveals an interesting profile of the population moving to suburbia. The 1985 Boston Redevelopment Authority Report on Demographics shows a net loss of 131,040 whites between 1970 and 1979. More significantly, those who left were married couples with children under eighteen. Whites without school-age children were not leaving the city, and unmarried whites actually increased in number. By 1990 there were a mere 12,000 white students in Boston's public
schools, while the city reported a 58 percent non-Hispanic, white population.

It may be tempting to assume that Boston, because of its prolonged opposition to busing, was an exceptional case. The evidence, however, shows that Boston's pattern of white flight was repeated in many urban centers, not the least of which was Denver, Colorado. In 1974 Denver had 119 schools with a population of 88,000 students, 66 percent of whom were white. In 1980 the overall population was 68,000, with 36 percent being white students. By 1995, the final year of busing, the number of white students in Denver's schools had dropped to 32 percent, only 66,000. The number of whites had decreased by 69 percent; black students by 7 percent, while Hispanics increased by 37 percent. By 1995, 70 percent of the students were minorities: 47 percent Hispanic, 23 percent black, and only 27 percent white. Once again statistics indicate a substantial population shift in the number of white students in the immediate aftermath of a desegregation order. The cause of Denver's accelerated white flight, as with Boston, was busing. Finally, a review of enrollment data from the U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Educational Statistics for 1995, reveals the following percentages of whites in public-school systems in the North: Detroit, 6.6; Chicago, 11.4; New York, 17.5; and Philadelphia, 21.7.

Resentment over busing did not end with the departure of whites from urban public schools. Civil unrest, falling home prices, and neighborhood displacement created an urban constituency heretofore unknown in American politics. White working-class Democrats, disenchanted with the effects of busing and racial policies of affirmative action and so-called quotas, turned to the Republican Party and its standard-bearer, Ronald W. Reagan. “Reagan Democrats,” as they were known, had a significant impact on the 1980 presidential campaign, helping Republicans to unexpected gains in states such as Massachusetts, Illinois, Michigan, and New York. The Democratic Party suffered particularly from the defection of its labor-union base, who shared Reagan's view on busing and affirmative action.

The classic working-class neighborhood of South Boston, a Democratic stronghold throughout the twentieth century, went Republican in 1976 and overwhelmingly supported Reagan in 1980 and 1984, as did the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. White males, Catholics, and working mothers in major Northern cities believed that the federal government had gone too far in racial matters. Largely supportive of integration, they disapproved of racial balancing and quotas, and these issues together with the nation's crime policies created new pockets of support for the more conservative Republican Party, which responded to their new constituency by promising an end to busing and a rollback of affirmative action quotas. Appointments to the Supreme Court of the United States took a decidedly conservative turn and contributed to a particular reluctance to support race-conscious remedies. Accordingly, race-based school assignments and related issues in the workplace have all but ended.

Surely, many changes in American life have contributed to this trend. But it is also true that discontent with busing created the atmosphere for a wholesale shift in party politics and with that a growing constituency in opposition to civil-rights gains of the 1960s.

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**Viewpoint:**

No, busing of schoolchildren was an effective way to correct racial discrimination in public education.

In the 1950s the school bus had been a symbol of educational progress. Three-fifths of schoolchildren in North Carolina, which proudly called itself the “school busingest state in the Union,” rode buses to and from school every day. Expending so much effort and money in transporting these children was a symbol of the state’s commitment to education. State officials were dedicated to getting children from rural areas into modern classrooms in the cities every day so they could become the good citizens and leaders of tomorrow.

Yet, school buses were also used to maintain racial segregation. Both black and white children were bused past schools closest to their own homes, so that they could attend schools only with children of their own race. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* decreed that separate school systems for black and white children violated the children’s constitutional rights. In 1955 the Court, in *Brown II*, considered how best to implement its decision. As a concession to states, which argued that overturning long-standing systems of education and school policies would be difficult, the Court said that segregation had to be dismantled “with all deliberate speed.” States took this wording as an invitation to
move slowly, or they pretended to act while actually blocking the decree. States such as North Carolina dismantled their separate school systems, but in their place created systems that maintained segregation in other ways. Instead of sending children to the school nearest their home, the school districts created “attendance zones” to direct children to single-race schools, so that by the late 1960s, fifteen years after Brown, virtually all schools in the Southern states continued to be segregated.

Some school districts created “freedom of choice” plans, so that students could choose which school in the district to attend. Though these plans did not employ race nor on the surface promise to maintain segregation, they effectively did so, as black students were discouraged from choosing white schools, and white students were dissuaded from attending schools that had once been set aside for blacks. Brown had been decided unanimously, and the Court maintained unanimity in all its decisions on school segregation thereafter. Chief Justice Earl Warren knew that this issue was too politically important to allow the Court to seem partisan. All the justices agreed, and the Court stood united in holding that segregation was wrong and that the various state methods to circumvent integration orders were also wrong. The Court had to decide if it was to permit states to get away with constitutional violations, even if they were done under the guise of “freedom of choice” or “attendance zones.” Was an organized evasion of the law less severe because it had the words “freedom of choice” attached or because the state did not overtly declare it wanted to maintain separate races in the schools? By the end of the 1960s the Court was losing its patience. Having school systems openly flout the law and ignore the Court was damaging to both it and the Constitution.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district, a combined precinct encompassing the city of Charlotte and the surrounding rural areas of Mecklenburg County, became the test case for implementing Brown. After Brown, North Carolina had taken some small steps to ending segregation, but these seem token in retrospect. There were 84,000 students in 107 schools: 71 percent of the students were white; 29 percent were African American. Of the 21,000 African American students in Charlotte, only 490 attended schools with white pupils, and of these, 392 were in one school with 7 white pupils. The other 98 black students in “integrated” schools were in 7 of the district’s schools, and the rest remained in all-black schools.

When black parents challenged the continued segregation of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools and the inferiority of the all-black schools, the school board responded by closing the all-black schools, instituting in its place a “freedom of choice” plan, under which students in an attendance zone could choose any school in the zone that had room, but they had to provide their own transportation. Transportation, black parents knew, would put the burden of integration on them rather than on the school board, so they challenged the board. The case of Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education (James Swann was a seven-year-old boy whose father taught theology at Johnson C. Smith University) was heard in a district court in 1965 and made its way through the federal courts in the late 1960s, as the U.S. Supreme Court was considering plans similar to Charlotte-Mecklenburg’s.

In April 1969, Federal District Judge James B. MacMillan, a native of Charlotte and a conservative pillar of the local community, concluded that the school district had maintained a segregated school system and in so doing had violated the Constitution. Heding the more-recent directives from the Supreme Court, that merely dismantling the old system of segregation was not enough and that school districts were now required to take active steps to achieve integration, MacMillan ordered the school board to come up with a desegregation plan. The school board dragged its feet, missing a June deadline, and then submitted a weak plan at the end of July that MacMillan reluctantly accepted as an interim measure. He ordered a more comprehensive plan to be presented in November, which would be implemented at the beginning of the 1970–1971 school year. In November the school board asked for an extension, which the judge denied. He then rejected the plan the board submitted, saying it would permanently relegate two-thirds of black children in Charlotte-Mecklenburg “to this kind of separate but unequal education.” The school board prepared another plan that would have left half the black students in segregated schools and provided no transportation for those attending integrated schools. MacMillan also rejected this plan and appointed Dr. John Finger of Rhode Island College, who had been an expert witness for the plaintiffs in Swann, to devise an acceptable plan. Finger’s plan desegregated the system by grouping three or four outlying suburban elementary schools with one inner-city elementary school, busing black students in grades 1 through 4 to the suburban schools and white students from grades 5 and 6 to the inner-city schools. In the junior and senior high schools, black students from
This case and those argued with it arose in states having a long history of maintaining two sets of schools in a single school system deliberately operated to carry out a governmental policy to separate pupils in schools solely on the basis of race. That was what Brown v. Board of Education was all about. These cases present us with the problem of defining in more precise terms than heretofore the scope of the duty of school authorities and district courts in implementing Brown I and the mandate to eliminate dual systems and establish unitary systems at once. Meanwhile district courts and courts of appeals have struggled in hundreds of cases with a multitude and variety of problems under this Court's general directive. Understandably, in an area of evolving remedies, those courts had to improvise and experiment without detailed or specific guidelines. This Court, in Brown I, appropriately dealt with the large constitutional principles; other federal courts had to grapple with the flinty, intractable realities of day-to-day implementation of those constitutional commands. Their efforts, of necessity, embraced a process of "trial and error," and our effort to formulate guidelines must take into account their experience.

The central issue in this case is that of student assignment, and there are essentially four problem areas:

1. To what extent racial balance or racial quotas may be used as an implement in a remedial order to correct a previously segregated system;
2. Whether every all-Negro and all-white school must be eliminated as an indispensable part of a remedial process of desegregation;
3. What are the limits, if any, on the rearrangement of school districts and attendance zones, as a remedial measure; and
4. What are the limits, if any, on the use of transportation facilities to correct state-enforced racial school segregation.


On 20 April 1971 the Supreme Court, once again unanimously, upheld MacMillan's order. MacMillan had rightly found that the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school board had maintained racially segregated schools, and his plan was a reasonable and appropriate one for ending racial segregation. The plan did not mandate a strict racial balance in each school—and had it done so, the Court said, it would not have survived judicial scrutiny. The burden of proving that its attendance plans were not discriminatory fell on local school boards, as did the remedy for discrimination. Simply dismantling the old segregated systems was not enough. "All things being equal," the Court said, "with no history of discrimination, it might well be desirable to assign pupils to schools nearest their homes. But all things are not equal in a system that has been deliberately constructed and maintained to enforce racial segregation. The remedy for such segregation may be administratively awkward, inconvenient, and even bizarre in some situations and may impose burdens on some; but all awkwardness and inconvenience cannot be avoided..."
in the interim period when remedial adjustments are being made to eliminate the dual school systems."

With the Swann decision the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district was desegregated. The Court insisted it was not requiring racial balancing—all schools did not have to have the same black-white ratio as existed in the community at large, but no school could be all black or all white. The real goal, the Court insisted, was racial diversity, not adherence to a mathematical formula. This idea was later buttressed in Regents of the University of California v. Bakke (1978), when the Court allowed policies that took race into account along with other factors in admissions to graduate schools and colleges but would not allow race to be used as the single factor.

The Court's new mandate in Swann required the dismantling of segregated systems immediately. Segregation and racism, however, were not simply Southern problems. Virtually every American city had a large black population, and by 1968, when the Kerner Commission issued its report on urban disorders, it had become clear that the North was no more integrated than the South. In the North, whites had migrated to the suburbs while blacks entered the cities, and by 1970 most urban centers were overwhelmingly black, while the suburbs were predominantly white. Along with this racial difference, the suburbs and cities had a profound class difference. Those remaining in the cities tended to be poorer, and consequently urban schools were not as well maintained as suburban ones.

In Milliken v. Bradley, the Court struck down a Michigan plan that required the busing of students between different school districts. In Charlotte-Mecklenburg integration was possible because one school district encompassed people of different races; schools in Detroit's single district were overwhelmingly black, while the white suburbs had their own district. Thus, integration would not be possible within district lines.

In Boston the School Committee had maintained grossly inferior schools in African American neighborhoods. Boston, a city of strong neighborhoods, still had a large white population in 1974 but was already undergoing a racial transition that was not the result of busing. African American migrants to Boston, which had been economically depressed after World War II, mainly settled in the South End (not to be confused with South Boston) and then began moving into the contiguous neighborhood of Roxbury, then home mainly to Jews and Irish Catholics.

Gerald Gamm, in the most recent study of the transition of Roxbury and Dorchester from being predominantly white to predominately black, Urban Exodus: Why the Jews Left Boston and the Catholics Stayed (1999), argues that the notion of "white flight" is too simplistic. What happened in Boston in the 1960s was not white flight so much as the continuation of a process under way since the 1920s. Boston's Jewish community had been migrating to the suburbs at the same time as blacks were moving into Roxbury and Dorchester. Boston's Catholics, on the other hand, were predominately urban. The Catholic Church focuses on local parishes that are defined by geography, while Jews and followers of other religious traditions are not geographically defined. Until after the early 1960s, the Roman Catholic Church strictly adhered to parish boundaries, and communicants in one church would not attend mass in another. Life for Catholics was rooted in the parish, where one was baptized, confirmed, married, and buried. Catholic parishes also maintained schools, so many Catholics worshiped and attended school in one place, at the center of their community. In Dorchester, the largest of Boston's neighborhoods, the answer to the question, "Where do you live?" was often St. Ann's, St. Peter's, or St. William's, rather than Neponset, Mount Bowdoin, or Savin Hill.

The Jewish community began leaving Roxbury and Dorchester in the 1920s. By the 1950s Roxbury was predominately black, though it still had a large Irish Catholic population. Boston's legendary mayor James Michael Curley grew up in Roxbury; so did Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. The out-migration accelerated in the 1950s, and boomed at the end of the decade and in the 1960s. The various programs that created the real Jewish out-migration are chronicled in Hillel Levine and Lawrence Harmon's The Death of an American Jewish Community: A Tragedy of Good Intentions (1992). Gamm argues that the transition was not a sudden one, that Irish Catholics stayed longer, rooted as they were in their parish institutions. Even after they left certain areas, the parishes remained and today still serve the neighborhoods. African Americans wary of using Boston's public schools, and who have the means to do so, send their children to the parochial schools, just as white Bostonians do.

Busing to eliminate racial discrimination worked in Charlotte-Mecklenburg; it was a disaster in Boston. Arguing from the Boston case that busing was a failure in all cases would be as misleading as extrapolating from Charlotte's example that it was a success in every
case. Contending that busing created white flight is also too simplistic, just as it would be to argue that busing was the only means to overcome racial discrimination. Social policies may influence change, but they cannot force changes.

If separate education was inherently unequal, was it any less so if the separation was caused by economics rather than by law? In Brown, the Court struck down de jure segregation, or segregation by law. By 1970 Americans were coming to recognize de facto segregation—that is, segregation not mandated by law but that had come into being for other reasons. In Swann, the Court acknowledged that it could not by its decree eradicate every form of prejudice, but by acting to prohibit discriminatory admissions policies, it could begin to educate students to the virtues of a racially diverse society.

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