

Maintaining the Future: The Boston Busing Crisis in the 1970s

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In September 1974, Boston Public Schools were under the first part of an order to integrate through busing,¹ set in motion by Federal District Court Judge W. Arthur Garrity. The first part of a multiple year integration plan, the September 1974 busing schedule included schools with ties to Boston's "proud, tightly knit neighborhoods" and busing roughly 17,000 students.² In South Boston, where much of the turmoil boiled over into daily life and played out in the local and national news, the residents were majority working class Irish Catholics. In these working class communities, they rallied around the schools as a "socializing force, inculcating the values of family and neighborhood in the face of a changing and threatening outside world."³ Busing, however, would bring the outside world to these institutions and introduce young people to both the 'outside world' and the people who were seen as a direct threat to the established cultural enclaves their families had worked hard to create over generations in Boston.

How do we use maintenance, as contrasted to innovation, to understand the racial, gendered, and class issues at stake in the Boston Public School system and the communities it serves? Busing was a solution to a problem that some Boston communities didn't think existed, or didn't think should affect them, and thus were threatened by the influx of people who did not fit

¹ It is worth noting that in 1966 another busing program began in Boston, called METCO, or the Metropolitan Council for Educational Opportunity. The program bussed non-white students from Boston to suburban schools in order to desegregate and provide better educational activities for those students. It is still in operation. <http://metcoinc.org/>

² Robert Reinhold. "Boston is fearful in busing dispute." *New York Times* September 15, 1974, p. 21., J. Harvie Wilkinson III. *From Brown to Bakke: The Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.

³ *Ibid.*, P. 204

into their family-based communities.⁴ As community networks began to break apart, partially in response to busing policies, new neighborhood networks formed without the schools as important social centers for community members.

The neighborhoods, wherein these schools were the central focus and often helped to maintain the community norms for generations, began to unravel in the wake of busing. Many families were bitter about the upheaval but unsure how to proceed. One parent stated that keeping her first-grader home might “instill disrespect for the law and racial prejudice.” She stated, “I disapprove of the law, but I felt that I’d be teaching the child to break the law if I boycotted... Also I would not want to form form prejudices. Keeping them home would do more harm than good.”⁵ Another noted, “I love Boston. I am not interested in leaving. I don’t see why I should be forced to move.”⁶ Even if they wished to move to the suburbs, many families could not afford to do so.

Activists on both sides of the busing debate protested over the changing educational landscape of the Boston Public Schools. Parents on both sides protested in front of schools, in neighborhoods, and marched on the Boston Common.⁷ Fighting and a stabbing eventually closed South Boston High School for one month in December 1974. Similarly, at Hyde Park High School, a fight wherein a white student was stabbed ended with 450 National Guardsmen occupying the school. As the first year of busing ended and the second began, students and community members

⁴ Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991.

⁵ Robert Reinhold. “Boston is fearful in busing dispute.” *New York Times* September 15, 1974, p. 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*; Wayne King, “Blacks Rally at Boston Common; Protest Effort to Halt Busing.” *New York Times* October 14, 1974, p. 24; David Rogers. “1000 in S. Boston rally against busing.” *Boston Globe* September 5, 1975, p. 14.

used busing as an opportunity to incite racist rhetoric, further rupturing the communities in which these schools existed and blocking attempts to create new communities across busing lines.

Boston Public School Students 10 Years Later

In 1984, ten years after the initial busing ruling, the *Boston Globe* began printing articles on the state of Boston Public Schools and Boston students. The *Globe* turned its attention to South Boston High to speak with students about the current state of community at the school.⁸ Students claimed family and ethnic pride as important contributions to their identity. At the same time, students adamantly pushed back against any stereotypes around class and income inequality, though the school encompassed students from some of the lowest income neighborhoods in the area. Many students admitted that lack of adequate study space, helping their families with babysitting or monetary matters, and general home concerns and instability made it difficult for them to focus on school.⁹

At the same time, however, alumni and community members expressed their disdain at the ten-year-old ruling and their sense of lost community. Many Boston residents had the impression that the Boston Public Schools were worse than they were before the desegregation efforts in the 1970s, but believed that overall Boston was a better place to live. According to a *Globe* poll, many Boston residents saw the need for more discipline, more funding, and a greater emphasis on preparation for work or college, as important factors for the future of BPS success.¹⁰

⁸ The authors of the article, Daniel Terris and Michael Tierney, had a special stake in the piece as they had run a community studies and publications program at the high school since 1980 called Mosaic. The program offers journalism workshops and an after-school program wherein the students researched “coming of age” in Boston. The program was partially funded with state money aimed at desegregation efforts.

⁹ Daniel Terris and Michael Tierney. “There’s hope at South Boston High.” *Boston Globe* November 4, 1984, p. SM14.

¹⁰ Muriel Cohen. “Anger on busing yields to a focus on education.” *Boston Globe* June 26, 1984, p. 1.

Although members of the community recognized the need for increased funding for education, some considered them to no longer be part of the community. Referring to South Boston High School, one business owner stated, “There is no high school – it’s an institution... the school doesn’t belong to South Boston anymore.”¹¹ An alumni of South Boston remarked, “we don’t even think about that school anymore... as far as we’re concerned, it’s gone.”¹²

This lack of community support for the schools affected educational quality. One former student, who had stayed in BPS and wasn’t bussed, noted that the classrooms remained segregated, but to her, a white woman, the quality of education was “fine,” but she said she “learned little that was positive about dealing with people.” On the other hand, another former student, whose mother had been one of the plaintiffs in school desegregation lawsuit, stated that her math grades were A’s because her teacher was afraid of her and the other black students. She graduated from college, but only with the help of “sustained tutoring in math and English.”¹³

A common theme from the former students who experienced busing in the 1970s was missed opportunities. This came through in multiple forms, whether it was a school transfer for a year, and then back to the school the student originally enrolled in, or in more extreme cases, missing an entire school year or dropping out of school altogether. One former student, originally from South Boston, was satisfied with his decision to drop out of school and join the Army, eventually also earning his GED. Another former student, who also dropped out during her senior year when she was refused a transfer, said that in 1984 the schools appeared more integrated, as

¹¹ Betsy Lehman. “South Boston residents express sense of loss.” *Boston Globe* June 25, 1984, p. 7.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ “Those who stayed in Boston schools.” *Boston Globe* June 22, 1984. P. 2.

her six-year-old son's school in South Boston had experienced no fighting and, she stated, "they're friends now. It's nothing like before."¹⁴

For those who left the district, the stories were similar. Though their lives shifted, and they often traveled long distances to get to their new schools, just as those being bused around Boston. Former students also expressed their fear, resentment, and backlash against authority figures based on busing. One student from South Boston, who left for a private school when busing began, noted how many of her friends she saw drop out of school. Though she left, she became "fearful of authority" because "one man's decision could change so much."¹⁵ Another former student, who dropped out of school, said that without busing he would have stayed in school. He stated that busing turned him from the shy and quiet kid to a radical who is "more or less against all kinds of authority."¹⁶

"This Fight is Ours": Repairing Neighborhoods through New Connections

As an unexpected epilogue to this story, in March 2016, Boston Public School students staged a massive walkout in protest of impending budget cuts. On February 29, 2016, junior Jaily Lopez posted an open letter on Twitter to all students announcing the issues and the upcoming walkout, scheduled for March 7. The letter alludes to the race and class divide occurring in Boston that is perpetuated and exacerbated by Boston Public Schools lack of educational resources – a divide that will only become worse as budget cuts create more holes in the educational and support resources the students need and want. The letter notes, "if students are engaged in school then there

¹⁴ "Some who left Boston schools." *Boston Globe* June 23, 1984, p. 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

would be less cracks for our youth to even look towards violence. We have lost too many young lives already.”¹⁷

On March 7, students from across the Boston Public School system converged on the Boston Common in protest. What the three organizers thought would be a small gathering turned into over 2000 students, all simultaneously worried and angry about the state of their future. Students were there to protest budget cuts for the 2016-2017 year, but also to protest the conditions of their school communities. They recognize the lack of building maintenance, technology, books, and supplies as part of a larger problem that budget cuts will only exacerbate the growing educational and class gaps. The students use the term “taking away from students’ futures” when discussing the budget proposal and the cuts that would be made.¹⁸

Though this current wave of protests are not about busing, the underlying currents of their arguments emerge from the policies that have played out in the decades since busing occurred – rising income inequality and increased segregation.¹⁹ BPS has maintained that they are committed to excellence in teaching and learning and the governor’s office stated that the budget is contributing to the reduction of the state’s deficit while, at the same time, inexplicably “increasing

¹⁷ Jaily Lopez. Twitter Post. February 29, 2016, 5:47 PM.
https://twitter.com/speechless_x3/status/704452963755024385

¹⁸ Allison Pohle. “How a group of Boston teenagers organized a massive district-wide protest.” *Boston.com* March 22, 2016. <http://www.boston.com/news/education/2016/03/11/how-a-group-of-boston-teenagers-organized-a-massive-district-wide-protest>

¹⁹ David Scharfenberg. “Boston’s struggle with income segregation. *Boston Globe* March 6, 2016.
<https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2016/03/05/segregation/NiQBy000TZsGgLnAT0tHsL/story.html>; Katie Johnston. “Half of city residents make less than \$35,000 a year, study says.” *Boston Globe* March 15, 2016. <http://www.bostonglobe.com/business/2016/03/14/city-divided/Wt6EnHNIwmNaUnWGgYLMcK/story.html>

investments in education.”²⁰ The protests worked to an extent – the school board did present a modified budget and voted on that, but the cuts were still extensive. Many schools and students still face uncertainty regarding their future.

One high school, where many students in the district apply for admittance each year because of their strong extracurricular activities and leadership programs, will suffer heavily in the 2016-2017 academic year. The Boston Community Leadership Academy, a pilot school²¹ in the Boston Public School system located in the old Hyde Park High School building, is cutting every class not mandated by state law. The students are losing key courses that will help them remain competitive in the future as potential college applicants and job seekers, and more so with the class and race barriers many have to hurdle. They are losing “gym, health, theatre, AP world history” and “AP biology” they are also losing other courses and activities which help students stay on track and in succeed in the classroom, such as the “strategies for success class, which helps ninth graders adjust to life in high school by teaching them how to balance homework with jobs and extra-curriculars.” They are also cutting classes that help students succeed outside of the classroom, “there will be no writer’s workshop or numeracy classes for 10th graders, which help them prepare for the MCAS exam. There will be no college readiness class for juniors to prepare

²⁰ Allison Pohle. “Hundreds march through Boston to protest public school budget cuts.” *Boston.com* February 17, 2016. <https://www.boston.com/news/education/2016/02/17/hundreds-march-through-boston-to-protest-public-school-budget-cuts>

²¹ Pilot schools in the BPS system were “explicitly created to be models of educational innovation and to serve as research and development sites for effective urban public schools.” Though they are part of the district, they have “autonomy over budget, staffing, governance, curriculum/assessment, and the school calendar to provide increased flexibility to organize schools and staffing to meet the needs of students and families.” Boston Public Schools, “School Types,” <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/Page/941>

them for the SAT or teach them how to apply for financial aid so they can avoid massive debt after college.”²²

The long trajectory of busing in Boston Public Schools and the related growing income inequality in the city of Boston begs the question of who is responsible for repairing and maintaining the bonds that keep the community, not just the students, invested in the local schools. The main thread running through the narratives of former and current students is one of lost communities and experiences. The busing policy, meant to integrate schools and create more equal opportunities, instead alienated the schools from the communities they serve. Now, the current budget issues in BPS has many critics stating that cutting the budget so drastically is institutional racism.²³ Boston is continually becoming more segregated based on income and education, and the public schools that provide the starting point for many to be competitive in later educational and career situations continue to live in the shadow of the 1970s busing decision.

²² “How Boston’s budget cuts are affecting this high school: A look inside Boston Community Leadership Academy,” *Boston.com*, March 28, 2016, <https://www.boston.com/news/education/2016/03/28/how-bostons-budget-cuts-are-affecting-this-high-school>

²³ Jessica Rinaldi. “Boston School Committee approves controversial budget.” *Boston.com* March 23, 2016. <https://www.boston.com/news/education/2016/03/23/school-committee-votes-on-controversial-budget>