

LOOKING FOR LEADERSHIP: BATTLES OVER BUSING IN BOSTON

Elliot Weinbaum

*They were right, my dear, all those voices were right
And still are; this land is not the sweet home that it looks,
Nor its peace the historical calm of a site
Where something was settled once and for all...
-In Praise of Limestone, W.H. Auden, 1948*

In 1954, in the *Brown vs. The Board of Education of Topeka* decision, the United States Supreme Court declared that "to separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone." To rectify this injustice, the Supreme Court demanded that schools be desegregated "with all deliberate speed."

For the Boston Public Schools, this court order would pose a monumental challenge to citizens and leaders. Desegregation would require a great upheaval in the way in which the Boston School Committee had managed the public education system. Aside from the federal courts, it was unclear who favored the efforts required for systematic desegregation. As the situation became increasingly polarized, few community leaders in Boston actively supported or planned for the desegregation that was made mandatory by the *Brown* decision and subsequent court oversight. However, over an eleven-year period, a series of court decisions sought to elucidate the damage that segregated schooling was doing to black students and require changes that would preclude such harm in the future.

In an effort to meet the demands of an increasingly vocal civil rights constituency and to comply with the Court's rulings, in 1965 Massachusetts passed the Racial Imbalance Act (RIBA), a law that mandated that local school committees work to eliminate racial imbalance in public schools. The 1965 law, already eleven years after the *Brown* decision was handed down, allowed the state of Massachusetts to withhold funding from any district that did not have a plan to remedy racially imbalanced schools. This law, supported by a coalition of civil rights activists, went further in requiring desegregated schools than any state law in the US up to that point. However, the legislation was limited. The law defined a school as racially imbalanced and in need of remedy if more than fifty percent of its students were nonwhite. The fifty percent requirement meant that the law would apply only to schools in the cities of Boston and Springfield. An all-white school was not considered racially imbalanced, thereby exempting the vast majority of Massachusetts school districts from being affected at all. Though the Act would be amended and modified repeatedly over the years, its purview was never expanded to force suburban and rural school districts to recognize or to act upon their segregated, largely white, schools.

Passage of RIBA silenced many critics who claimed that the North had not done as much as the South to desegregate schools. Massachusetts could now point to one of the most "progressive" desegregation laws in the country. With their apparent success in getting such legislation through the Massachusetts statehouse, the coalitions that had been built to advocate for passage of such a law largely dissolved (Ross & Berg, 1981). These coalitions did not foresee the difficulties that would attend to the implementation of the new law. RIBA left all of the responsibility for policy implementation and rectification of the longtime *de facto* segregation to local school committees. In Boston, the real battles to end segregation did not end with the passage of legislation, they had just begun.

Immediately following the passage of the Racial Imbalance Act in 1965, the Boston School Committee began to oppose it and sought ways to evade the mandates the state imposed. In 1963, Louise Day Hicks, beginning her second year on the Boston School Committee, was elected as chairwoman of this powerful body. During the next eleven years, Mrs. Hicks would become the most visible and outspoken opponent to the Racial Imbalance Act and the myriad of state and court ordered remedies to racial segregation in Boston's schools. Hicks was the daughter of William Day, a successful and much-loved judge and banker in Boston's working class Irish community. Hicks married and raised two sons in the heavily Irish neighborhood of South Boston. Over nearly fifteen years of political activism, including terms on the School Committee, the Boston City Council and in the US Congress, Hicks would fight constantly and dependably to represent the concerns of the constituents who had loved and been loved by her father and who had helped her to launch her political career.

Led largely by Hicks, the opposition of the Boston School Committee to the Racial Imbalance Act would allow the city to avoid implementing any of the law's provisions for at least seven years after its passage. Through a series of court challenges and meaningless reforms, the racial composition of Boston's schools remained largely unchanged in spite of the law. Finally, in 1972, the state legislature, embarrassed by the resistance of the Boston School Committee, withheld \$52 million of state funds from the Boston School District due to their non-compliance with the law. This penalty, outlined in the legislation, had never been levied against a district up to that point. While Hicks and the Committee released statements implying that the district would forgo state funds before conceding their autonomy, they did begin construction of two new neighborhood schools in racially integrated areas. This step allowed the Committee to petition the court for release of the funds. In September, 1972, Superior Court Judge Robert Sullivan required that the funds be released as the Committee had taken tangible steps to reduce racial imbalance (Weintraub, 1972). This relatively small step of constructing two new schools, allowed both the School Committee and the state legislature to claim victory.

Having avoided significant penalty for their delay and distract tactics, the School Committee and supporters on city council requested a state-wide referendum on the Racial Imbalance Act. They were eager to see it repealed before real sanctions were taken against the School District. Boston Mayor Kevin White, in the middle of his second term and already thinking about his political future, backed the idea of a referendum. In this way, he avoided taking a clear stand on the issue. Feeling secure that voters would support a repeal of the law, Hicks led a march on the statehouse of over 2,000 protestors to advocate for the referendum. Though some tried to portray the protestors as extremists or reactionaries, they received significant official attention. Governor Francis Sargent met with representatives of the marchers to hear their opinions. Referenda bills that had been opposed by the state education committee in the past were now being considered for re-introduction.

As the clamor for a referendum grew, even supporters of the 1965 law began to realize that some changes in the law would be required. In the statehouse, black caucus member Melvin King said that he was "essentially opposed to any change in the law." However, in the face of increased opposition, he recognized that his efforts and those of others concerned about the fate of this once progressive law, would best be directed to "maintain as much of its concept as possible." Following the protest and some debate in the legislature, Governor Sargent released a statement in which he said that he did not support "junking" the Racial Imbalance law but that he was "anxious to make it work by adding amendments" (Worsham, 1973). Hicks and her supporters saw this statement and others as a victory, allowing them to lobby for amendments that would make any moves toward desegregation totally voluntary, and extremely unlikely.

While state legislators were beginning to respond to the pressure and persistence of the anti-desegregationist activists, the largely old-line Protestant state Board of Education was growing weary of the entirely Irish Catholic Boston School Committee disregarding its authority. They wanted to see action and to force Boston to uphold the law. Though their motivation for wishing to see the School Committee conform is questionable, they did not want to see the law disregarded. Toward that end, the state Board of Education commissioned its own desegregation plan. The chief architect of the state plan was Charles Glenn, a veteran of the civil rights movement, having participated in protests and boycotts in the segregated South before joining boycotts in Boston. In 1971, he was appointed as Director of the state's Bureau of Equal Educational Opportunity and he approached the question of desegregation with zeal. Glenn's plan would reduce the number of imbalanced schools from 61 to 31 and would require the busing of 17,000 students. The plan, which he finally recommended to the State Board, mixed students in South Boston, the stronghold of opposition to desegregation, and Roxbury, the Boston neighborhood with the largest percentages of students who were black and economically disadvantaged. In the ten years prior to the start of busing, only three black students had ever attended South Boston High (Malloy, 1986). While Glenn contended that he "didn't have any choice" about mixing the solidly black and white schools, others felt that Glenn had targeted Mrs. Hicks and her fellow anti-integration forces in South Boston.

Early in 1973, the state Board of Education employed the services of Harvard Law School professor Louis Jaffe to hold hearings on Glenn's plan. In a series of community hearings, parents had an opportunity to voice their opposition and inhibitions about the prospect of mandatory busing. Many alternatives to mandatory busing were offered. Mary Welby, a mother of school children living in Jamaica Plain (a white working class neighborhood), proposed free college tuition for students who voluntarily enrolled in an imbalanced school. Dr. John Finger, a desegregation expert from the University of Rhode Island and a technical consultant who participated in the preparation of the plan, testified that mandatory desegregation had the potential for violence. He suggested that the schools might first attempt to "teach children to get along with one another" (Cohen, 1973, p. 16). Friend of the court briefs were filed in support of the plan on behalf of the American Jewish Committee, Americans for Democratic Action and the American Civil Liberties Union. Opponents of the plan noted that not a single local Boston organization was represented among the supporters (Weintraub, 1972). Though judges and "experts" may have supported the plan, local leadership was less

certain of the timeline and process.

At the state level, policy makers had tired of alternative desegregation plans and court challenges. It had now been almost twenty years since the Supreme Court issued its decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case and Boston's schools had become increasingly segregated. The School Committee had been largely successful in their plan to evade desegregation. In October 1973, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ordered the School Committee to implement the desegregation plan which Glenn had constructed and Jaffe disseminated. "The Committee must understand that the time for testing the meaning of the statute has long since passed and the time for prompt action to implement it is at hand," the Court said (Lukas, 1975, p. 219).

The battle lines between state and city were becoming increasingly clear. When RIBA had been passed, many in Boston felt that they had been unfairly targeted by the state. The new state plan designed by Glenn and the State Board of Education focused the animosity even further. The latest court decision allowed state bureaucrats to tell Boston parents to which school they were to send their children. One of Glenn's colleagues said, "Charlie's patience had long since been exhausted by dealing with those bigots on the School Committee. I think he said to himself, 'We've had enough of you racists in South Boston. You're going to Roxbury, let's see how you like that'" (Lukas, 1975, p. 240).

It was clear to everyone involved that this exchange of students alone could endanger the plan. Even prior to the adoption of the plan by the State Board, there was evidence that the rapid and dramatic changes that would be required had the potential to derail the intent. After the public hearings, Professor Jaffe, who had conducted hearings about the state plan, stated in his report that "South Boston's people are intensely hostile to blacks...I conclude therefore, that this part of the plan should be restudied" (Lukas, 1975, p. 241). While Jaffe did not propose any specific alternatives, there were other non-white communities with which South Boston had a less hostile relationship with which busing could have been ordered. The state Board and the Supreme Judicial Court chose not to heed the warnings or alternatives and ordered the plan to be implemented in September 1974, the start of the next school year.

As the state Board of Education and the Boston School Committee continued their contentious battles in the state courts, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) weighed in at the federal level. On behalf of 53 plaintiffs, the NAACP selected Tallulah Morgan, a mother of three school-age children, as lead plaintiff in the case that would become known as *Morgan v. Hennigan*. (James Hennigan was then chairman of the Boston School Committee.) Judge W. Arthur Garrity, an upper-class suburban Irishman, was randomly selected to hear the case. Filed in March 1972, the plaintiffs argued that, contrary to the position of the School Committee, segregation had been actively maintained and enforced by the Boston School Committee. School segregation was not, the NAACP argued, the result of housing patterns or other societal factors over which the School Committee had no control. Plaintiffs' lawyers combed the recorded minutes of School Committee meetings to find evidence that would demonstrate that segregation had been produced by manipulation of feeder patterns, school construction, and pupil assignment practices. The School Committee defended itself arguing that its long-time policy of assigning children to "neighborhood schools" was being evenly applied in a city with clear ethnic neighborhoods, the origins of which were historical and beyond the control of the Committee.

In June 1974, over two years after the case was filed, Judge Garrity released his 152-page opinion in the *Morgan v. Hennigan* case. He found that the School Committee had indeed demonstrated its intent to segregate students along racial lines. He determined that "racial segregation permeates schools in all areas of the city, all grade levels, and all types of schools." School officials had "knowingly enforced systematic" segregation and "intentionally" maintained two separate school systems (*Morgan v. Hennigan*, 1974). Judge Garrity determined that the School Committee had designed and redesigned school districts and catchment areas, built schools, controlled transfers and planned feeder patterns aimed at maintaining the segregation with which the white majority had become comfortable (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1975). Ironically, in the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision Chief Justice Earl Warren had written, "Segregation in Boston public schools was eliminated in 1855." It became clear that in the intervening twenty years, the segregation being targeted by federal courts had expanded from *de jure* segregation, which was made illegal in *Brown*, to the *de facto* segregation that existed in many northern cities. Schools were to be the battleground on which the war against *de facto* segregation would first be waged.

Judge Garrity had spent fifteen months crafting his decision in *Morgan v. Hennigan*. With less than three months to go before the state plan was originally to be implemented, Judge Garrity adopted that plan as Phase I of the federal court-ordered remedy. He then set about devising what he felt would be a more appropriate final (Phase II) plan. In announcing his decision, Garrity made it clear that he had not read the state plan prior to incorporating it into his decision. He put his confidence in the plan the State had adopted but, likely wary of some of its shortcomings, did not want responsibility if it were to fail. Garrity did, in mid-summer, give

the School Committee an opportunity to present their own plan, but they would not offer any plan -- which included what they had taken to calling "forced" busing -- and he would not accept a plan that did not reassign large numbers of students. The state plan would be adopted.

For Phase II of his plan, Garrity needed an expert on school desegregation issues and worked closely with Robert Dentler, the dean of Boston University's School of Education. Together, they composed a team of four masters spearheaded by Attorney General Edward McCormack. The Supreme Court's *Milliken v. Bradley* decision in July of 1974 precluded them from creating a plan which would involve suburban districts in the desegregation plan. Thus, the Judge and his advisors felt that they had little choice other than mandatory busing plans. McCormack acted as a political broker and worked to sell the city's elected leaders on a plan which would have eliminated the Roxbury-South Boston exchange and reduced the number of bused students from 17,000 to 14,900. McCormack's plan called for a different district configuration than the state had implemented and it garnered the support of Mayor White and newly-elected Governor Dukakis.

However, this locally designed plan, the product of negotiation with a number of parties, was rejected. Judge Garrity did not think that it did enough to sufficiently integrate schools. He rejected the masters' plan and created his own. Garrity's plan (Phase II) reinstated the Roxbury-South Boston District and upped the number of students to be bused to 25,000. He felt there was no other way to assure the plaintiffs proper treatment. Even after ordering his plan be put into action, Garrity continued to have a strong hand in managing the affairs of the school district. He had lost faith in the willingness or ability of elected leaders to oversee implementation of a court decision with which many of them disagreed. The judge continued his involvement with the operation of the school district and his actions determined busing patterns, funding, school hours and on one occasion even instructed South Boston High what type of athletic equipment it should purchase (Lukas, 1975, p. 250).

Following Judge Garrity's statement that the city would be forced to adopt the state desegregation plan in September of 1974, meaningful debate largely ceased. For nine years, anti-integration leaders had been fighting against this possibility and firmly believed that they could prevent such a plan from being implemented. Since the passage of RIBA, there had been little organizing in support of integration in Boston and much in opposition. The support that existed for the Garrity plan came from liberals in the suburbs who would be unaffected by the plan. The plan went largely unheeded by most Bostonians, black and white, who were tired of getting advice from people whose children would not be affected by any plan. White citizens did not desire change and black citizens had been short-changed for too many years to believe that a new desegregation plan would serve them well. Upon the start of busing, Mayor White commented, "We've fought that suburban-siege mentality too long and too hard, and our efforts for metropolitan solutions have been resisted too consistently for us to trust that judgment or sincerity" (Jordan, 1974, p. 1). White himself described his position when he said, "I am for integration and against forced busing, and these positions are not mutually exclusive" (Connolly, 1974, p. 1). It was hardly a rousing endorsement of the new law of the land.

From the time Garrity issued his first order in June through the opening of schools in September 1974, there were feverish preparations by anti-busing forces in the hopes that the decree could be avoided. The coalition of liberal forces, which had worked to adopt and maintain the RIBA, was almost silent. Though they had fought for desegregation, the details of busing students made almost everyone uneasy. The anti-busing forces grew increasingly virulent as the summer wore on. The forces which Louise Day Hicks had rallied in opposition to RIBA almost ten years earlier spiraled largely out of her control. Hicks had encouraged ROAR (Return Our Alienated Rights, the anti-busing organization that she had founded) by railing against suburban elites and "the forces who attempt to invade us." She seemed to speak on behalf of all citizens and school children when she used slogans such as "You know where I stand" and "Boston for Bostonians." Hicks, a City Councilwoman at this point, told officials, "it is against our children's interest to send them to school in crime-infested Roxbury" (Taylor & King, 1974, p. 1). In contrast, her successors used even more openly racist rhetoric and frequently engaged in inflammatory posturing. Elvira Palladino, one of the newer leaders and a representative of the Boston Home and School Association in East Boston referred to the busing plan as "this kidnapping of [our] children." She urged parents to keep their children out of school until the order was rescinded (though East Boston was exempt from the plan due to geographic constraints and Palladino's family would not be affected) (Ho & Pomerene, 1974). She had also been heard in public describing blacks as "jungle bunnies" and "pickaninnies," terms which Hicks reputedly abhorred. Many of the demonstrations and protests by white leaders that followed the mandatory busing order took on a new and openly racist tone.

Many white protestors supported school boycotts as a means of resisting busing prior to the opening of school on September 12. Principal William Reid of South Boston High School told students that they should heed parental advice about whether to come to school, making a boycott seem like a viable and reasonable option (Connolly, 1974). In fact, when schools opened on September 12, only 124 out of 1,300 enrolled students showed up at South Boston High (Connolly, 1974). Almost daily, there

were marches and protests in the days preceding the school opening. White Bostonians were not alone in their opposition to the busing plan. Thomas Atkins, president of the Boston NAACP and the city's first elected black official (he had been a City Councilman) also called for black parents not to send their children to school when it opened. Though many black leaders supported the call for desegregation, they, like Atkins, feared for children's safety and had doubts about the busing plan.

Some city leaders did seek to improve the plan's likelihood of success. Intercom, a public service arm of the Boston advertising industry, introduced the "cool-it" campaign prior to the start of busing. It provided an opportunity for Boston leaders to speak out in support of the plan. Most presenters chose only to emphasize the need for safety in light of the protests which were occurring. Jim Plunkett, quarterback for the New England Patriots football team, did an ad for "cool-it" and commented "if busing's inevitable then let's make it safe." John J. Kerrigan, chairman of the Boston School Committee, implored parents to "join with me in nonviolent activity." Again, Representative King was one of the only voices speaking in favor of integration when he said in his ad that "people ought to be taking responsibility about the kind of school system we want for our young people and the kind of neighborhoods we want to live in" (Botwright, 1974, p. 12). Overall, there were few leaders who publicly stated that busing would bring positive results in the future.

With such a dearth of support from Boston's leadership, it was hardly surprising that many Bostonians resisted the desegregation orders. Within six months, the state and federal courts through their rulings had essentially taken over the functions of the Boston School Committee. The Boston School Committee was essentially America's first school board. It had become a launching pad for political careers and a most effective patronage machine. It was, some have argued, the last bastion of old fashioned machine style Irish politics in Boston. Judge Garrity was fully aware of the opposition that his order would inspire. In his opinion, he wrote, "No amount of public or parental opposition will excuse avoidance by school officials of constitutionally imposed obligations" (*Morgan v. Hennigan*, 1974, p. 482). Like Charles Glenn before him, it seemed that Garrity, who had never lived in Boston, was sending a clear message to his detractors (and fellow Irish Catholics) in South Boston.

After years of ongoing battles, emotions on both sides of the busing debate were running high. The white community felt like the school system was the last place where they had some sense of control. The democratically elected School Committee had retained a white anti-integration majority throughout the controversy and many interpreted this to mean that busing would never become a reality. The black community, though keenly aware of the disparities in predominantly black schools (physical plants were considerably older, city funding per capita was lower), felt some sense of control and familiarity with their local schools. Through the racial segregation which the Judge documented, over eighty percent of Boston's black students attended schools in which fifty percent or more of the students were non-white. Almost all of Boston's black teachers taught predominantly black students. As pernicious as it was, the limited mobility created a sense of community in some neighborhood schools (see Walker, 1996). The idea that a judge, largely unfamiliar with Boston, would be designing attendance patterns scared many citizens, black and white. Citizens of Boston had ostensibly been included in the state's design of the desegregation program via community hearings. However, they saw their input largely ignored in favor of a plan designed by a state bureaucrat. This sequence of events contributed to the sense of disempowerment and fear experiences by both blacks and whites.

Other historical situations well beyond the purview of the schools or even the state contributed to the sense of uncertainty and fear which many Bostonians felt. A confluence of events raised the level of tension in America at large and between the black and white communities. Only six years before the start of the Judge's busing plan, Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot and massive demonstrations turned to riots in many northern cities. Non-violence, it seemed, had become a thing of the past and racial tension escalated. As the concept of busing was being discussed and debated in the streets, news outlets screamed out regular updates about the impeachment of the President. From day to day, there was a question about what the future would be for the country should Nixon be impeached. Finally, the Vietnam War was regularly being televised. Community members frequently learned of the deaths of loved ones in Southeast Asia. The controversy over the war had done much to damage the social fabric of America and called into question many old alliances. The white community, traditionally advantaged in Boston, was experiencing a great deal of unwelcome change. Unwavering support for America's soldiers had been the tradition with which white Bostonians were raised. The war nearly decimated this tradition. Unemployment in South Boston had risen from five to sixteen percent in the first half of the 1970's (Rossell, 1977). It seemed that the world had changed and left many white Boston residents behind (Malloy, 1986) One of the few remnants of status and power was control of the School Committee. It seemed clear that it would not be relinquished without a fight.

In addition to these factors, there had been a void of local Boston leadership in support of the Judge's decision leading up to the introduction of forced busing in Boston. Gary Orfield argues that such a void is not unusual. "School desegregation is probably the only process...that is consistently assailed as illegal or illegitimate by many public officials" (Orfield, 1978). Governor

Sargent, who had signed the law requiring it, had meekly supported integration, often only after the threat that federal funds would be withheld. However, he stated frequently that he was opposed to busing, but never put forth an alternative plan to accomplish integration. Mayor White frequently reiterated his opposition to busing and in the days prior to the start of school in 1974 told parents that they should decide what is best for their children. In fact, under White's direction, the city of Boston spent over a quarter of a million dollars on appeals to the court-ordered busing (Jordan, 1974). Massachusetts US Senators Edward Kennedy and Edward Brooke both supported desegregation from their offices in Washington but did nothing to gather support or form a liberal coalition in Boston. And, while the NAACP had been the organization to initiate the federal case which would mandate busing, many blacks in Boston were wary of the prospect of having their children bused to other neighborhoods. Atkins, the NAACP leader, described the absence of leadership by saying, "The mayor from time to time has refused to lead and has tried to hide. The Governor, this one and the last one, from time to time has tried to say it's the mayor's problem, it's the judge's problem, it's anybody's problem, it's not my problem" (US Commission on Civil Rights, 1975, p. 56). The black community, without a significant voice in electoral politics at that point, had few official venues for voicing support or modifications to the plan.

One lone exception to this dearth of leadership in Boston was the city's Catholic Archbishop. In April 1974, Humberto Cardinal Medeiros addressed the state's Joint Committee on Education and advocated for RIBA and its busing plans. In his address, he aimed to appeal to all of Boston's citizens, quoting the late John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. He told his audience that the segregation of Boston's schools "represents a serious conflict with the American creed of equal opportunity. Such an inequity is in contradiction to the social teachings of the Roman Catholic Church...We have supported this law because it is right, because it calls upon our citizens to collaborate for the common good of all" (Medeiros, 1974). Cardinal Medeiros even went so far as to direct the Archdiocesan schools not to accept students who were fleeing the effects of desegregation. The extent to which local schools heeded his order is debatable (Cohen, 1974).

The Cardinal's efforts notwithstanding, northern segregation remained an issue long after many schools in the South had desegregated. In the North, written laws which mandated segregated schools had been discarded long before. However, while the US had a tradition of using federal forces to enforce laws in the South, there was no such tradition in the North. Because of this, a very different model of leadership would be needed to achieve successful integration. Because those most opposed to integration were whites who felt alienated by the system, it would be necessary to include them and to reduce fear and resistance in order to make any plan a success. In the case of Boston, Mayor White had the obligation to make such overtures, to reduce the sense of alienation among both blacks and whites in Boston, and once the Judge's order became law, to support it in his city. He failed in his leadership. But he was not alone in his failure. Where were the supporters of RIBA who had pushed for it to become law? Where were the advocates of desegregation who had initiated the *Morgan v. Hennigan* suit? Where were the experts and masters with whom Judge Garrity designed the plan? In the days leading up to the mandatory busing that the Judge imposed, there was no one to speak out about the advantages that it could bring and the lessons that it could teach. During the protests, no one even made it clear to the anti-busing faction that a court order could only be overturned through legal action. All of the protests and boycotts that they could coordinate could not change Garrity's ruling. Positive leadership could have avoided some of that strife and the negative effects which it caused.

In her book about the desegregation of San Francisco's schools, Doris Fine describes six failures of leadership that she saw evidenced in that city. She discusses failures of perspective, nerve, judicial authority, responsibility, vision and commitment (Fine, 1986). Christine Rossell places the majority of the blame for Boston's protracted desegregation battles at the feet of Mayor White (Rossell, 1977). However, each of the failures Fine describes can fall squarely on the shoulders of any number of community and city leaders in Boston in the ten years preceding the start of busing in 1974.

The white community and School Committee failed to understand the strength and pace of the movement toward racial equality and desegregation in the United States. The parochial perspective of many of Boston's anti-desegregation leaders led them to believe that they could stop change at the schoolhouse doors. From the time RIBA was passed until Garrity issued his order in 1974, many cities had embarked (either willingly or unwillingly) on desegregation programs. A wider perspective on the part of city leaders, which looked to cities beyond Boston, would have shown that such a position would last only in the short run. Additionally, the immediate concerns of elected officials contributed, understandably, to their narrow perspective. Very early in her career, in 1963, when Hicks was chair of the School Committee, she was presented with a list demands by a group of concerned black parents. Initially, she was quite concerned by the inequalities in the schools that they highlighted. However, she soon found that taking a harder line would be more politically advantageous in the short run, allowing her to represent a core of constituents about whom she cared deeply.

A failure of nerve led some leaders to avoid public stands in favor of integration. Only the city's Archbishop and a few black

leaders spoke out in favor of desegregation. However, there was no organization analogous to the anti-integrationist ROAR in the pro-desegregation camp. Among citizen leaders, there was no large scale organizing to press the issue forward. Politicians lost their nerve when they considered upcoming elections and the apparent will of the white majority. It was not until 1976, two years after busing began, that any major city leader spoke out in favor of obeying the court order (Rossell, 1977). In Boston, the "nerve" lay with the resisters. In spite of death threats, leaders like Hicks continued to speak for and to lead a substantial group of people in opposition to the court order. As Orfield has stated, "Merely by urging respect for the law and telling the public that change is inevitable after a court decision, local leaders could [have] lighten[ed] the burden on school administrators and improve[d] the local climate" (Orfield, 1978, p. 424). There was no such action at the crucial point before busing began.

Garrity and his court advisors also failed to use judicial authority wisely. As the San Francisco experience made clear, "Courts can analyze differences, resolve disputes, and order remedies for aggrieved parties. However, they cannot put their prescriptions into practice. Courts are not equipped to run institutions" (Fine, 1986, p. 196). Nonetheless, in Phases I and II of his desegregation plans, Judge Garrity took it upon himself to manage the school system, often involving himself in the most minute details of school operations. He consulted, though often disregarded, experts in the field. The experts he did hire, like Robert Dentler, showed a patronizing disregard for the School Committee and the citizens of Boston. Dentler wrote of the School Committee, "No one in Boston had any reason to believe that the Boston School Committee could plan its way out of a portable classroom, let alone make plans for every school in the system" (Dentler & Scott, 1981, p. 21). This was an ironic comment considering the Judge and just been convinced that it was through the School Committee's devious and consistent planning that the schools had become so segregated. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the disregard that the judicial system had for the institutions of power in Boston. Dentler & Scott (1981) wrote, "All of the school districts in Mississippi had been desegregated within eighteen days from the issuance of a federal court remedial order" (p. 20). It was as if he missed completely the complexities specific to northern desegregation and more specifically to the unique history of segregation in Boston. The Mississippi model would not work in Massachusetts.

School officials defaulted on their responsibility to provide children with an education. Superintendent of Schools William J. Leary was largely invisible during the battle and at one point told parents, "If you are fearful of...putting your children on a bus, be my guest down at the beach" (Metcalf, 1983, p. 205). He advanced no remedies to the untenable and illegal segregation in his school system, and he put forth no educational objectives for integration. Principals and teachers, those charged with educating Boston's children, did not organize or advocate for desegregation. Clearly, the School Committee could not be looked to for support of the plan. Again, Mayor White, as the person most familiar with the personalities and power structure, failed in his responsibility. Rossell argues that White played his role as political broker passively and conservatively when it could have been done more energetically and thoughtfully as Mayor Daley did in Chicago or Mayor Lee in New Haven (Rossell, 1977). In fact, there is little evidence that White brokered much at all.

Even organizations like Intercom, which ostensibly took on some responsibility for helping to assure that the desegregation plan was implemented with a minimum of disruption, behaved in a largely superficial manner. The fact that most of the information they disseminated gave, at best, a tepid endorsement of integration, was a failure of responsibility. They did not heed the advice of Professor Finger from the University of Rhode Island who urged education about "how to get along" with people from diverse backgrounds. Concerted effort on the part of advertisers could have been used much more effectively in the formation of public opinion. Instead, it did little to change the status quo.

In view of the School Committee's intractable resistance, the city and school administrations' invisibility, and the business community's weak efforts, the Mayor showed a remarkable lack of vision. There was no effort to partner with businesses or other organizations to stimulate support. While White worked with the police and other city services to minimize the possibilities for violence, he showed no vision about how he might work with other services or organizations to make desegregation work more successfully. White's vision went no further than his next election. Instead of leading people productively toward the inevitable busing, White offered jobs to Hicks' supporters in return for their support in his coming election. "I don't have enough names for the jobs he gives me," Hicks told a friend (Lucas, 1975, p. 605).. White missed an opportunity when he did not ask the supporters to tone down or eliminate anti-busing rhetoric in return for the patronage jobs that he provided. David King Dunaway argues that when confronted with the challenge of desegregation, a mayor has the obligation to create a "total urban strategy" to facilitate the transition. "This [plan] could include comprehensive urban development programs; mobilizing support from business, foundations, and universities; organizing parents in poverty areas and training them to function on local school boards; and pressing local colleges to develop more valid curriculum and teacher training programs" (Dunaway, 1977, p. 7). The only planning that White did was with the police.

Ultimately, there was a failure of commitment on the part of the Mayor and other integration advocates. The Mayor could not take the lead in something in which he did not believe. White's commitment to integration was questionable, but his opposition to busing was clear. In spite of this, he had a duty to lead his city in a way which would yield success and not further despair, disenfranchisement, and flight. Integration advocates, hesitant to push an unpopular solution, felt that the Judge, an official appointed for life with little to risk in terms of political capital, would absorb all of the disapproval for the desegregation order. Pro-integration forces felt that the court would mete out their version of justice; they needed no protests or marches. They lacked a commitment to the success of their program in the long term.

Due to all of these failures, Boston's integration battles continued long after Judge Garrity began busing students in 1974. As one busing opponent said years after the busing had begun, "We won. We prevented it for eight years...[Garrity's] program was never a success" (Formisano, 1991, p. 203). In some ways, she was correct. Boston schools today are far more segregated than they were in 1974. The white flight that anti-busers had forecast early on in the debates did indeed come true. Though its causes are many, white enrollment in Boston's public schools declined over 16% in the year Phase I of Garrity's plan began. Prior to this, the decline in white enrollment in the Boston Public Schools had never been more than 5.8% in a single year. In 1976, as Phase II was put into place, white enrollment declined another 16.5% (Buell & Brisbin, 1982). In addition, the student population was soon composed of a much higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students. Though students were being actively spread around the city, the pool of students had dramatically changed, making integration increasingly difficult.

In the years that followed the start of mandatory busing in Boston, Charles Glenn, Mayor White and even Louise Day Hicks all expressed regrets over aspects of their behavior at the time. They spoke of missed opportunities, poor judgment, and a lack of foresight. Had there been even one strong leader with perspective, nerve, authority, responsibility, vision, and commitment, the results might have been so much different. The battles over busing in Boston continued to shape Boston's educational system and political landscape for well over a decade. In 1984, Raymond Flynn, an anti-integrationist active in 1974, was elected as mayor of Boston. It was not until September 1985 that Judge Garrity issued his 415th and final court order and returned control of the schools to the Boston School Committee. He did, however, retain "standby jurisdiction" to intervene again, should he deem it necessary (Malloy, 1986).

For Boston's public schools, the *Brown* decision in 1954 laid the groundwork for a contentious battle that would ostensibly end more than 30 years after the decision was handed down. Overt battles in courtrooms and classrooms ended with a result that complied with the letter of the law but largely failed in its intent. Students ended up attending school in a district that was more segregated than it was at the time of the *Brown* decision. The small size of districts in many northern states (in comparison to the county-wide districts in many southern states) and the legal prohibition against forcing suburban districts to participate in desegregation plans presented a set of structural and legal challenges to successful desegregation. The tools that integration advocates attempted to use to surmount these challenges, legislation and litigation, were blunt instruments that largely neglected those who would be most directly affected by the resulting changes.

Supporters of change seemed to assume that changes in attitude would follow changes in law. Positioning people in a new context with respect to their neighboring communities was not nearly as easy as passing a law or drafting a court decision. The hard work of changing the beliefs and practices of students, staff, families, and communities either before, during, or after the start of mandatory busing may have served to make the changes more palatable. However, this hard work was largely neglected. The possibility exists that by developing a more thoughtful dialogue about race and segregation, Boston, and many other northern cities, could have avoided some of the re-segregation that occurred following Garrity's involvement.

Opponents to school desegregation believed that they could exempt themselves from the historical and judicial trends that were occurring all over the country. In many ways, they were right. They moved out of the city or transferred their children out of the public schools in an effort to keep them in the largely white and homogeneous environments in which they were comfortable. Right up until the school buses rolled through their neighborhoods, and even after in many cases, these opponents resisted the remedy that had been mandated. Because many of them had resources that allowed them to avoid the changes, they have.

This is not a story of good people and bad people. It is not the story of winners and losers or wise and foolish. This brief case study illustrates the challenges that we face in making change in public schools, an institution that is among the most contested terrain in the US. This challenge is made particularly difficult when it is layered onto of a story of race in America - a story filled with fear and suspicion and a lack of communication. It is the story of change-makers and change-resistors. It is the story of how the two groups failed to lead and to communicate with each other or their natural constituent groups in ways that could have worked to the ultimate benefit of everyone.

Fifty years after the *Brown* decision, and thirty years after Boston started busing students to desegregate its schools, the goal of desegregated schools has almost vanished from the public discourse. Our inability to conduct widespread conversations about the challenges and benefits of living and learning in diverse communities has led us to avoid the subject. Thanks in no small part to the failures described above, school desegregation became viewed by many as something untenable, contentious, and unnecessary, if not downright undesirable. While the judicial mandate provided a window of opportunity, it was incumbent upon local leadership to bring the desired results to fruition. In the case of Boston, and so many other cities, such leadership failed.

References

- Botwright, K. O. (September 1, 1974). King, Timilty to make TV appeal for safety in schools. *Boston Globe*, 12.
- Buell, E. H., & Brisbin, R. A. (1982). *School desegregation and defended neighborhoods*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books..
- Cohen, M.. (March 28, 1973). Parents protest at three sites during imbalance hearing. *Boston Globe*.
- Cohen, M. (August 29, 1974). White parents find serious problems in efforts to set up alternative schools. *Boston Globe*, 16.
- Connolly, R. (September 6, 1974). NAACP will use courts to block school boycotts. *Boston Globe*, 1.
- Connolly, R. (September 12, 1974). First day of school relatively calm. *Boston Globe*, 1.
- Dentler, R. A., & Scott, M. B. (1981). *Schools on trial*. Cambridge, MA: Abt Books: .
- Dunaway, D. K. (1977). Desegregation and City Hall: The mayor's role in the schools. *Integrated Education*, 15(1), 3-9.
- Fine, D. F. (1986). *When leadership fails*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- Formisano, R. P. (1991). *Boston against busing*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.
- Ho, M. & Pomerene, N. (September 4, 1974). Dorchester parents plan to join bus boycott. *Boston Globe*, 5.
- Jordan, R. (September 10, 1974). White issues appeal to reason - calls for peaceful integration. *Boston Globe*, 1.
- Lukas, J. A. *Common ground: A turbulent decade in the lives of three American families*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Malloy, I. (1986). *Southie won't go*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Medeiros, H. (April 4, 1974). Text of Cardinal Medeiros's appeal to retain imbalance act. *Boston Globe*, 4.
- Metcalf, G. R. (1983). *From Little Rock to Boston: The history of School desegregation*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Morgan v. Hennigan*, 1974.
- Orfield, G. (1978). *Must we bus? Segregated schools and national policy*. Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution.

Ross, J. M. & Berg, W. M. (1981). *I respectfully disagree with the judge's order: The Boston desegregation controversy*. Washington, DC: University Press of America.

Rossell, C. (1977). The mayor's role in school desegregation implementation. *Urban Education*, 12 (3), 247-270.

Taylor, B. & King, N. (September 16, 1974). NAACP president urges all Hub parents to send their children to school. *Boston Globe*, 1.

US Commission on Civil Rights. (1975). *School desegregation in Boston*. Washington, DC: US Commission on Civil Rights.

Walker, V. S. (1996). *Their highest potential: An African American school community in the segregated South*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Weintraub, R. (November 30, 1972). . Boston board asks court to cancel school plan. *Boston Globe*.

Worsham, J. (May 2, 1973). Sargent "backs" imbalance law. *Boston Globe*.

Elliott Weinbaum

Elliott Weinbaum is a researcher at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. His research interests include intergovernmental relationships, performance-based accountability, and other effects of policy on school improvement. He is currently taking part in a national study of high schools and the roles that outside organizations play in high schools' strategies to improve instruction. Other recent research has examined the impacts of statewide accountability systems on district improvement efforts aimed at high schools. Dr. Weinbaum holds a B.A. from Yale and a Ph.D. from Penn. He can be reached at elliottw@gse.upenn.edu.

Copyright 2020 The University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Online Urban Education Journal

Source URL: <https://urbanedjournal.gse.upenn.edu/archive/volume-3-issue-1-fall-2004/looking-leadership-battles-over-busing-boston>