

Class warfare and the Boston schools:

by Kim Marshall

Busing is meant to bring people together, to make America one nation again.

But in Boston, busing is part of the problem—dividing the inner city, and spotlighting the stratification between city and suburb.

In this report from a ghetto school, a young teacher offers some radical proposals to make desegregation work, with less pain and more justice for all.

When school began last September, I had been teaching for five years and never had a white student in my classroom for more than two weeks. The Martin Luther King Jr. Middle School in the Roxbury section of Boston has been virtually all-black for more than eight years. There are white neighborhoods within five or six blocks of the school, but the white kids have walked or been bused longer distances to predominantly white schools, leaving the King School with around 750 black sixth, seventh, and eighth graders.

For years the King had a reputation as one of the most troubled schools in the city. False fire alarms, endless fighting, assaults on teachers, robberies and muggings in the parking lot, vandalism and break-ins at night, high teacher turnover, and only intermittent learning marked its progress through the late 1960s. Five and a half years ago, the school got a new black administration and a crop of new teachers, and since then the situation has steadily improved.

Last summer we were suddenly faced with the prospect of being integrated by Federal District Judge W. Arthur Garrity's sweeping citywide desegregation order. We had said that it would never happen at the King, but one morning we picked up the papers and found that our student body was to become 65-percent white. We were stunned.

We experienced a welter of conflicting emotions. Some thought the impending

presence of white kids from nearby working-class neighborhoods might upset the delicate equilibrium we had worked so hard to establish in the school. I remember saying to a friend that we had just begun to get the hang of teaching in an all-black school, and now we were in an entirely new ballgame. We fretted about the possibility of interracial insults and fighting, about the kind of polarization and gang warfare we'd heard about in other integrated city schools.

My own apprehension bordered on panic. I didn't know what to expect from the white kids who would be in my class. I was afraid that after five years of teaching black kids, and orienting my whole approach and some of my curriculum to them, I would unconsciously favor black kids and perhaps resent some of the new students for being more privileged. I imagined scenes in which I would come down harder on white kids who said "nigger" than on black kids who said "honkey." I feared that being even-handed, avoiding being seen as partial to black kids or white kids, would be impossible.

And yet what kind of future did the King School have as an all-black ghetto school? Was our nervousness about integration part of a belief that we really had a good thing going, or merely resis-

The view from Room 326

tance to changes in patterns and routines, inertia in the face of a real challenge? As teachers met the week before school began, there was a growing sense of excitement, a sense that this might be the best thing that had happened to the school in a long time. Dingy classrooms were painted, new programs were planned, a dangerous junkyard behind the school was cleaned up, and everyone seemed more filled with hope and vitality than I remembered in any previous September.

This is what happens when whitey comes into the school, said the cynics, and they were absolutely right. But they could have saved their cynicism. This has always been one of the underlying reasons for integration, and we were watching it operate to our own benefit.

Meanwhile, we were unnerved by the national attention focused on the city of Boston as it poised for desegregation. As reporters and TV cameras from all over the world watched every move, people seemed to be taking an increasingly hard line: "No way I'll send my kid out of this neighborhood." "It'll never work, even if they bring in the Marines," and on the other side, "It's worked in cities all over the country, and there's no reason why Boston has to be any different." But in fact there were plenty of things that made Boston different—one being the lukewarm attitude of almost all public officials (which made Judge Garrity appear more and more like a dictator);

another being the intensity of the resistance to cross-busing in South Boston, an impacted and easily organized Irish blue-collar neighborhood that swore a blood oath to destroy the plan in the name of the very survival of the community.

When school opened, the world saw angry demonstrations, rocks smashing through the windows and thumping against the sides of school buses, weeping, terrified black kids stumbling off the buses into the arms of their outraged parents, and in the days that followed, motorcycle escorts for every bus, and policemen standing shoulder-to-shoulder along the streets of South Boston. There was widespread chuckling, especially in the South, about the "irony" of such ugly racism and violence in the liberal mecca of Boston, and some facetious talk about sending freedom riders North to help out. But this ignored the fact that those who come to drink from the cultural and intellectual waters of the city rarely live in the city and certainly don't send their children to the infamous Boston public schools. Only perceptive observers saw the situation as one of class warfare between the city's lower-income residents and the affluent suburbs that refused to play more than a token part in the process of integrating and upgrading the city's schools; class warfare in which the Irish cops who grew up in South Boston were ordered by the liberal mayor to turn their own neighborhood into an armed camp, in which the judge who ordered the plan got tough and then rode out to

his suburban home every night; class warfare in which some liberal intellectuals who had espoused civil disobedience against Jim Crow in the South and against the Vietnam war had the gall to say that the civil disobedience of the anti-busing cohorts was unjustified because it was for an unjust cause; class warfare in which the victims were innocent children.

My own fears about being even-handed with black and white kids in grade 6-H were quickly put to rest, as were the fears of most King teachers. I liked the white kids, I liked the black kids, I liked the Hispanic kids, and I loved the way they got along. Most King School teachers had various lectures on race relations and gimmicky human-relations exercises ready to roll, but I scrapped them all when I saw that the kids didn't need them. From the very beginning of the year there was a sense of harmony and unity that was a delight to behold.

Not that the kids weren't tense and completely aware of the rocks and epithets flying little more than a mile away; not that white parents weren't grilling their kids the minute they got home

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about what had happened that day, and keeping their kids out of school at the slightest hint of trouble; not that the white kids didn't scamper for their buses with something approaching panic at the end of each day. But the King School had its quietest and smoothest opening in many years. Veteran teachers were open-mouthed at the sight of white kids walking the halls and sitting in classrooms again. We told ourselves that this was a new beginning for the school, that we were now dealing with a more balanced slice of America (the school was now around 45-percent white), and might escape the problems and distortions of being a ghetto school. One teacher said he thought integration was bringing out the best in both the black and white kids in class discussions and behavior, and everyone remarked on the decrease in fights (there were few interracial fights), the lack of false fire alarms and assaults on teachers, and the hundreds of touching scenes of friendship and loyalty between black and white kids. A comment often repeated in those days was that if the adults would just stay out of it, the kids could work it all out.

Students sold almost \$5,000 worth of candy in under a week, as part of a contest organized by one teacher, and threw themselves into other school activities with real gusto. But the school continued to give its students minimal options—only one or two gym periods a week in a miserable little room with four basketball hoops, one to three science periods a week, no outdoor recess, overcrowded classrooms, and virtually no extracurricular activities except the few organized by teachers with their own

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time and money.

I began the year by assigning kids to tables so that each table was racially and sexually integrated and introduced my new students to learning stations. This teaching system allows kids to do their seven daily assignments in any order they want, with as much or as little help as they need, as long as they finish all seven papers by the end of the day. The system, which has worked well for four years, proved ideal. It allowed me to deliver concentrated individual attention to kids all over the room and to escape the negative discipline hassles of stand-up teaching, and it gave kids invaluable practice at reading and working on their own, and covered all the basic skills and a lot more. Learning stations also brought kids together in an informal yet purposeful atmosphere and bred a whole set of friendships that seemed to ignore racial boundaries.

Things were going so well that, after two weeks, I asked the kids to tell me privately which four or five people they wanted to sit with, and when I collated their choices and formed five new groups, each one was integrated (one group even ended up having boys and girls, which in the sixth grade is remarkable). Kids of all races worked together, played together in their free time, read together in the quiet reading time, ate lunch together, got in trouble together, and in a few cases wanted to go home together—but that's where it stopped. The climate outside the school continued to be tense and ugly on both sides, and one white boy in my class was roughed up and his brother badly beaten as they walked down the street outside the school instead of taking the bus home.

With race more or less a neutral issue in the classroom, the human problems of teaching 29 restless, active kids, with reading and math scores well below national averages, were paramount once again. I was unable to discern any significant differences from previous years in the difficulty of the job or the rewards I got from it. It continued to be fresh, fascinating, stimulating, sometimes infuriating, exhausting, funny, and often frustrating, especially in dealing with what seems to be an annual quota of two or three kids who have been passed along to the sixth grade with virtually no reading skills. The first three months were the hardest, since I had to wean kids from their dependence on a stand-up teacher



Main entrance to the Martin Luther King School, Roxbury.

who would do a lot of their thinking and self-control for them. There were days when the kids' lack of independence made the learning-station time incredibly taxing, when I just couldn't get around to answering the hundreds of questions, and some kids shouted and whined for help. But slowly they found ways of figuring out directions by themselves, getting help from friends, and ultimately working in little groups of four or five that just bubbled with the excitement of learning. Gradually, I was able to help the kids who really needed it and talk informally with almost everyone.

I took several groups on all-day field trips around the city on Saturdays—climbing Blue Hill, visiting several other

sights, eating lunch at my wife's and my apartment, and stopping in on each family as I dropped kids off. Parents seemed happy with the way the classroom was going and pleased with the reports of racial harmony that their kids were bringing home, and several said that their kids were suddenly blossoming and doing well in the kind of structured open classroom I was running.

But Christmas this year found me wondering whether integration had really changed the school that much. I felt that despite the new clocks on the walls, more aides and helpers, new desks, and the initial inspiration it gave to many teachers, the mere presence of those white students in the school didn't make its

future much more hopeful. It was horrifying to see how much we had slipped back into many of the same patterns as in previous years and how little sense there was anywhere in the building that we might become a really superb middle school and make a permanent, dramatic difference in the lives of our students. The fact is that the white students who are being bused into the school aren't much different from the black kids in social terms, and I think the job of giving our students a first-rate education continues to require new methods to meet their learning styles, a good deal of extra funding, new materials that don't bore and turn kids off, and a breed of teacher that's hard to find and harder to keep.

It continues to be absurdly hard to teach well in a school like the King. It's physically and emotionally draining, burning out the most dedicated souls (I've seen seven or eight superb teachers leave in ruins), and making others increasingly cynical. I felt that cynicism knocking on my own door, raising all the rationalizations for not continuing to put in the amount of time and energy required to do a half-way decent job or for moving on to greener suburban pastures. And yet any institution that demands extraordinary effort from people on a continuous basis is unviable, and the King School and the hundreds of others like it can't go on chewing up human beings year after year to deliver a third-rate education to the kids who have to attend them.

I'm pretty hopeful about many of the kids who leave the King School, and don't think they're doomed to lives of poverty, drugs, and despair. But their survival in America is less a product of what we've done than of the great personal human resources they had before they even went to school. We should have done so much more for them, and yet we can't and we won't for future students unless there's an extraordinary compensatory effort or until the society becomes truly integrated and schools like the King simply cease to exist. It's hard not to become something of a radical when you go from the wretchedness of the King to visit an affluent suburban public school or a private school like Phillips Exeter Academy. It's awfully hard to justify this kind of inequality and to stop yourself from thinking of the effects of sharing some of those resources. Here are thousands of good teachers spinning their wheels dealing with the neuroses of the children of affluence, bathing in resources and materials and sparkling physical plants. And here we are in

There's no question that the suburbs are an integral part of the city's problems.

Boston, fighting over integrating South Boston with Roxbury.

As the weeks passed, the situation in South Boston grew more and more menacing. Buses were stoned less, because of the massive police protection, but a number of incidents continued to stir up angry demonstrations, and in one of these a black man was dragged from his car and badly beaten by what can only be described as a lynch mob. The state police were called in to replace the occasionally violent Boston policemen, a boycott of integrated schools by hundreds of white families continued, several high schools endured an armed-camp atmosphere (complete with airport metal-detectors at the doors), the courageous pro-integration stance of the local Catholic hierarchy was met with reduced church attendance and emptier collection plates, political leaders continued to fudge on their support of the busing plan or openly oppose it, and the rhetoric continued to escalate. Several black leaders even talked of the need for an Army division with bazookas and machine guns to protect black kids in South Boston.

Finally, in December a white student was stabbed and almost killed in South Boston High School, allegedly by a black student, and things blew sky high. Blatant racism surfaced, with white anti-busing mobs shouting, "Bus them back to Africa!" and "Zulu, Zulu," and the then-chairman of the Boston School Committee pointing out a black TV reporter in Judge Garrity's court, saying,

"I'll bet he likes bananas." With this kind of polarization in December, and with a more sweeping busing plan scheduled to take effect next September involving three other entrenched ethnic communities, it seemed that there was no end in sight. Most people agreed that it was only a matter of time before someone, probably an innocent child, would be killed.

To Judge Garrity, it's a clear legal issue. The NAACP brought suit against the Boston School Committee, charging that it had contributed to the (admitted) segregation of the city's schools by manipulating the flow of students into racially segregated schools. The judge found this to be the case and as a remedy imposed a citywide desegregation plan that was drawn up by the Massachusetts department of education (a plan that involved massive busing, shifting of teachers, closing schools, and overcrowding others). It's true that the segregation of Boston's elementary schools is largely the result of housing patterns rather than official action, but Garrity chose not to take a specific approach, remedying only the specific misdeeds of the School Committee. (Had he done so, he would undoubtedly have been vilified by liberals for throwing away the perfect chance to integrate and upgrade the Boston schools.) Garrity could not involve the suburbs because the Supreme Court had just ruled in the Detroit case that urban/suburban cross-busing could only be ordered if it could be demonstrated that the suburbs had contributed to the segregation of the city's schools.

Talking to an anti-busing parent, you realize that Judge Garrity's legal reasoning about the culpability of the Boston School Committee is meaningless to people who regard Committee members as champions of their rights. And a remedy that desegregates the whole city seems absurd to people who feel that the segregation of the schools is mostly the product of housing patterns. The fact that the judge ordered the entire city integrated, rather than dealing with the specific segregative actions taken by the School Committee, feeds the suspicion that suburban liberals were just waiting for an excuse to push through their cherished ideas of racial mixing and school reform—and there is an element of truth to that. Years of legislative and executive action had failed to make a dent in the increasingly segregated and deteriorating quality of Boston's schools, and the

Ronald Torres and William Henderson, two of the author's students in Room 326.



NAACP suit was the perfect opportunity to get the enormous power of the federal courts behind much-needed changes.

But to hundreds of white parents in Boston, the plan is anathema because of its overtones of social engineering and the threat it poses to the neighborhoods, more so because it's forced, and even more so because it's being imposed by people who live outside the city and don't have to get their feet wet. A number of suburban communities, including Garrity's, accept about 2,400 black students as part of the METCO busing program; but the program is voluntary, the numbers are token, many suburbs want no part of it, and nobody is talking about forced busing of suburban kids into Boston.

The idea that busing is a tool to improve the quality of the city's schools comes through weakly to the anti-busing people. They get the message that the logic of desegregation is to get the white kids into those terrible black schools, let their parents find out how bad conditions really are, and motivate those parents to use their greater power and influence with local politicians and School Committee members to get the schools improved. But when it's your kids who are being subjected to several years of third-rate schooling while you make all those phone calls about peeling paint, poor textbooks, and inadequate facilities, you can see how this might seem like a Machiavellian scheme, and you suggest that all the money going to buses and police overtime go straight into improving the city's schools.

The arguments that forced desegregation will improve the poor quality of all Boston schools by shaking up the school system, and that integration benefits all kids by preparing them to live in a biracial society, are unconvincing to many white parents in Boston because they are unproven ideas to most people and smell of social engineering. The argument that less-advantaged kids gain by rubbing shoulders with more-advantaged peers is of questionable validity in a city that has been bled of much of its middle class and whose more upwardly-mobile families send their children to parochial or private schools. Is it possible to get much of a class mix in such a city with any amount of busing? To the degree that more-advantaged kids do pull up their less-advantaged classmates, the argument is still disturbing to white parents. It's hard to persuade them that their children aren't being pulled down a little in the process.

There's a real lack of communication.

While Garrity's legal logic is widely regarded as a pretense for social engineering, many supporters of the busing plan think that opposition to it on grounds of neighborhood schools and Constitutional rights is a facade propped up in front of naked racism. Neither side hears the other's arguments, and the situation continues to get more polarized.

The more I think about busing in Boston, the more I become convinced that it is (as Robert Coles put it in a widely read interview in *The Boston Globe*) a scandal. Judge Garrity made a courageous decision, but he could not involve the suburbs, and without their involvement the busing plan can't be meaningful in social or educational terms and is simply not fair. What is emerging is one of the clearest and most divisive class issues of our time, spotlighting the stratification that has developed between city and suburb.

There's no question that Boston's suburbs are an integral part of the city's problems. Every time a white middle-class family leaves the city for the suburbs, it increases Boston's racial and economic segregation and shrinks the city's meager tax base a little more. And every snob-zoning law in the suburbs makes it harder for lower-income blacks and whites to escape the city. It's the less advantaged who are subjected to a disruptive busing program because their School Committee was stupid enough to get caught adding to racial imbalance in schools that were already segregated by housing patterns and the flight of the white middle class. Of course, it's good the School Committee got caught; but the remedy doesn't begin to encompass the metropolitan dimensions of the problem.

The original rationale for school integration in the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision in 1954 was that racially separate schools could not be equal and would deny opportunity to blacks. But a growing body of social-science research suggests that the key variable in classroom achievement is not race but class, that race was seen as the variable before because blacks are disproportionately lower-income while their white classmates are more likely to be advantaged. Can there be a significant degree of class mixing involved in the racial mixing in Boston? Are less-advantaged kids surging ahead by rubbing shoulders with their more-advantaged peers? It's

happening in my classroom and others, but within narrow parameters and often in less than ideal conditions, because more-advantaged whites and blacks are almost by definition not sending their kids to the Boston schools. The only way to bring about a significant degree of class integration as well as racial integration is to involve Boston's belt of affluent suburbs.

How can the suburbs be involved when many have already shunned the voluntary METCO program, which buses only token numbers of black students out of Roxbury? One thing is clear: suburban parents won't bus their children in to the Boston schools with the city as dangerous and the schools as bad as they are now. This means that urban-suburban cooperation would probably mean busing black students out to the suburbs, which angers many blacks because it puts the burdens of being bused completely on their kids. But there's no getting away from the fact that the suburbs hold the cards; at the moment the courts can't force them into a busing program and the state legislature is unlikely to pass any cross-busing programs, so, unless a new method of coercion can be found, it must be on their terms. The only other scenario is the most hopeful one voiced by supporters of the current busing plan—that it will result in greatly improved quality in Boston's schools and the ultimate return of the white middle class to the city. But with the current hysteria, this seems unreal, and another scenario of increasing racial polarization and white flight to the suburbs seems more likely.

If it is true that poorer kids are deprived of achieving their real potential by going to school with other poor kids and would stand a much better chance if they went to school with more-advantaged kids, can we look forward to a Supreme Court decision mandating class integration with all deliberate speed, outlawing all-poor schools as inherently unequal? Somehow it doesn't seem very likely. The courts are beginning to look at the way property-tax differentials force poorer communities to make a larger tax effort for a smaller school outlay, and there is a remote possibility that a more liberal Supreme Court in the future might be persuaded that the suburbs are indeed an integral part of the segregation of city schools. But none of this is a way out of the present situation in Boston.

We're at an impasse; the anti-busing people don't show any signs of giving up, and Judge Garrity, with the integrity of the federal courts and the credibility of a

major desegregation order at stake, is unlikely to back down either. Maybe we'll look back on this period of violence and rhetoric as a brief scuffle in the battle that successfully integrated the schools and neighborhoods of Boston and began the renaissance of the city. But maybe we'll see it as the time when Boston died, the direct cause of the South Boston Massacre of 1976 and the Dorchester Race Riot of 1978. Does anyone really know which way it will go? Is anyone really in control, thinking and planning systematically with a ten-year perspective? Is this any way to make social policy—keeping your fingers crossed?

As the Kerner Commission Report pointed out several years ago, one of the most disturbing trends in America today is the separation of our society into two nations, one black and the other white, one poor and the other well-off, one trapped in urban and rural poverty, the other comfortably ensconced in suburbia. The idea of busing is to bring people together, to get blacks and whites to see that they can live in peace, to make America one nation again. But in Boston, busing is part of the problem. Right now it's accelerating the flight of whites to the suburbs, heightening tensions between the races, bringing ugly racist sentiments out into the open, and doing nothing to bridge the gulf between the city and the suburbs.

Even if the present busing plan works by dint of strong support from all political leaders and massive police action over a period of years, it would still be unjust. To have the plan succeed would exact an enormous social cost in all the kids yanked out of school, driven onto the streets, subjected to racial abuse, or attending schools with an armed-camp atmosphere, and in a pervasive sense of cynicism and powerlessness. To solve the whole region's divisions and problems (which include the isolation of the suburbs from the city) and to make schools like the King really fine schools, something much more radical has to happen. The momentum towards desegregation is unmistakable and irreversible, but to be acceptable it has to be carried through to its logical conclusion and justly applied to all concerned.

In the spirit of stimulating debate about long-range alternatives, here is a four-point proposal:

1. Establish a metropolitan board of education that would control finances,

standards, general purchasing, and transportation for all communities within a 45-minute radius of Boston, while local school councils (one for every neighborhood of about 45,000) would control hiring and curriculum.

2. Put a \$2,000 educational voucher in the hands of every student in the metropolitan region and give families the chance to choose the schools they want their kids to attend and give their voucher to, with the metropolitan board of education paying for transportation. (Over-applied schools might handle their waiting lists with a lottery system.)

3. Equalize the tax effort in different communities by replacing property taxes with a progressive income tax to fund the vouchers.

4. Amend the State Racial Imbalance Act so that it defines as unbalanced any district that has less than the metropolitan percentage of minority students (around 5 percent) in every school and classroom (the present Racial Imbalance Act defines an unbalanced school as one with more than 50-percent non-white students, while an all-white school is considered "balanced"). Districts thus defined would have to present an affirmative-action plan for recruiting minority students and comply with the law within three years, otherwise they would lose their state and federal aid (and without that aid they would be in a weaker position to attract students of any race in the competitive buyer's market created by the voucher plan).

The intent of a plan like this is obvious: to give people the freedom to go to their neighborhood schools or be bused to other schools within the metropolitan area; to bring about more class and racial integration on a broader scale; to involve all the suburbs with their enormous human and material resources; to give people more time and make integration less threatening; and to make the element of coercion more subtle and applicable to everyone within reach. Under the surface is the notion that integration at the level of 5-percent minority students shouldn't be threatening to anyone, and yet might be a tool in bringing about improved schools in the whole region through the voucher system.

If such a plan (or others more imaginatively and carefully formulated) were acceptable to Judge Garrity and passed by the state legislature, the effects would be far-reaching:

—The Boston School Committee

would be out of business, replaced by the metropolitan board of education and the neighborhood councils.

—The Boston schools would be challenged to prevent the exodus of thousands of students (and the loss of hundreds of jobs) by improving their quality and taking full advantage of their location in the city.

—Educators throughout the region would be subject to a new form of accountability, which could only be a positive force for them.

—The area would probably be eligible for millions of dollars of federal and state desegregation aid.

—Suburban schools would be in the position of recruiting black students, and students would be in the position of choosing schools the way they now choose colleges.

—People would have a choice of educational programs, since different schools would undoubtedly emphasize different approaches (open-space, traditional, clusters, etc.) to win students.

—Incentives to move out of the city would be reduced and there might be an increasing number of students and families who would move back into the city.

—Many of the most dangerous and dilapidated ghetto schools, which could not attract students under the new system, would close.

—In the long run, schools with much more than 7- or 8-percent black students would be eliminated, integrating the students into schools all over the metropolitan area.

—Every community in the region would be involved in dealing with educational inequalities, thus recruiting more talent and spreading the job out among more people.

—Educational parks for special-focus programs might be developed, drawing students from all over the region.

—Those who violently object to their children having one or two black classmates would have the option of moving out of the metropolitan region.

Objections to such a plan are numerous: resistance to the idea of a racial quota, the burden of busing being mainly on black students, the dilution of critical masses of black students, the opposition of some suburban communities, and the problem of neighborhood districts that couldn't attract their share of minority students (South Boston, perhaps?). The plan has one leading advantage: it's a lot better than what is going on now, and it's a lot fairer. But clearly we've got a lot of thinking to do. □