

Lesson 3—Everyday Life

Busing in Boston

Objectives

- To understand the difficulties of breaking down segregation in Northern cities like Boston
- To appreciate the daily changes and frustrations experienced by families under court-ordered desegregation

Notes to the Teacher

Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1957, American public schools in the South began the process of breaking down *de jure* (enacted by law) desegregation. *De facto* (existing in fact but not law) segregation in the North was not specifically targeted. In fact, Chief Justice Earl Warren stated as part of the majority opinion in the *Brown* decision that “segregation in Boston public schools was eliminated in 1855.” However, in Boston, like many large cities in the North, housing patterns supported a *de facto* segregation, with students assigned to schools based on where they lived. Schools in neighborhoods like South Boston, East Boston, Charlestown, and Dorchester were wholly white whereas schools in Roxbury, Mattapan, and the South End were overwhelmingly black.

In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg* (1971), the Supreme Court approved utilization of measures characterized as “administratively awkward, inconvenient, and even bizarre” to achieve integration—and busing was a measure specifically approved. In 1972, *Morgan v. Hennigan* was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts, charging that Boston Public Schools were unconstitutionally segregated. Using the verbatim stenographic accounts of the meetings of the Boston School Committee—which showed a clear record of resistance to desegregation—prosecuting attorneys proved that Boston’s schools were not only segregated *de facto* but also *de jure*. The Boston School Committee was accused of running a dual school system—one for whites and one for blacks and other minorities. The critical point was the middle school system that automatically fed blacks and whites into separate schools.

To correct the problem, the State Board of Education passed the Racial Imbalance Law, which, in essence, required the busing of nearly 10,000 white and black students and school reassignments for thousands of others who did not need to be bused. The Racial Imbalance Law declared that any school that was more than fifty percent black was illegal (sixty-seven of Boston’s schools were directly affected). On June 21, 1974, Judge W. Arthur Garrity found that the Boston School Committee had used covert techniques to segregate the system and had done so with the intention to segregate. Judge Garrity’s decision was upheld on appeal, and he subsequently ordered that busing and school reassignments be implemented beginning with the 1974 school year. Everyday life was about to change dramatically for thousands of Boston school children and their parents. Blacks would be bused into the white bastions of Dorchester and South Boston. Whites would be transported into all-black neighborhoods of Mattapan and Roxbury. It meant the sudden wholesale desegregation of blacks and lower-class whites, a mixture that traditionally had produced the most hostility and violence.

Students begin this lesson by reading accounts of the early stages of busing under the volunteer METCO program and the potential reaction this method of desegregation would bring when forced on neighborhoods like South Boston and Dorchester. Students then read about the trials and tribulations for students and families in the first few days of court ordered busing. The lesson concludes with an analysis of the reaction of the President.

Since this lesson contains material that deals with race, remind students to be sensitive to the feelings of other students in the class.

Reminder to Teachers

- Decide if the appropriate primary sources analysis worksheets from the appendix will be used in this lesson.
- Assign those sections of the basal textbook that are relevant to this lesson.

To Bus or Not to Bus?—That Is the Question

Read the following selections, and complete the questions that follow.

Life in a 'Busing Family'

Perry Stone is 16 years old and he wants to be an ichthyologist. Three years ago he expected to be an electrician.

Three years ago, Perry Stone was in the seventh grade in a Boston public school. Since the eighth grade, he has depended upon a bus to take him from his home in Castle Square to a school in Wellesley. Now a sophomore at Wellesley High School, Perry is a Metco student. A Metco student is one bused from the core city daily to a suburban school. [METCO was a voluntary busing program that by 1974 involved the busing of nearly 2,000 black students into white suburbs.]

Perry's 12-year-old brother, Kevin, also depends upon a bus to take him to school. Kevin, a student at Warren Junior High School in Newton, has attended Newton schools as a Metco student since the third grade.

The boys' mother, Mrs. Frances Stone, is pleased with the education her sons are receiving. She wouldn't want them to return to the Boston public schools, even though each must arise at 6:45 A.M. to catch his bus to school.

Mrs. Stone's youngest son, Marc, is in the fourth grade in the Abraham Lincoln School in the South End. This is the same school Perry and Kevin attended before they became Metco students.

Mrs. Stone is not impressed with the school.

"I don't think there's very much dedication among the teachers," she says. "Those teachers are all rush, push, push. They're home ahead of the kids."

The only advice Perry recalls receiving at the Lincoln school was from a French teacher who suggested that he drop back to a slower group because he wasn't doing well in French.

Despite the hardships, which include the long bus ride twice a day, he wouldn't want to go to a Boston school. Metco has broadened his horizons.

Kevin, a bright child, was part of a Harvard study group at age 4. When he attended the Lincoln School, his mother said, he was constantly pushed forward into classes with older children because he was so bright.

Mrs. Stone asked the Harvard group if this was a good procedure.

"They said he'd be too immature, by age level, and that it would do him harm," she says. "They advised Metco, so he could be in a school with kids his own age who are on his level."

"I'm opposed to the teachers' attitudes (in Boston)," says Mrs. Stone. "They blame everything on the home condition. They think every black child is an emotional problem."

Her two oldest children depend upon buses to take them to school and they're thriving, despite the arduous trip. Mrs. Stone says she might agree with President Nixon's anti-busing policies if the Boston schools "were up to par."

To her, the issue is really quality of education for her children, and "I feel the suburban schools systems are far ahead of the Boston school system."¹

¹Bob Sales, "Life in a 'Busing Family'," *Boston Globe*, 19 March 1972.

Mother Keeps Girl from School to Avoid Busing

Her voice was soft, her smile hesitant—but Mrs. Beryl Readon's [sic] conviction was unmistakable as she propped herself up against a pillow in her bed at the Massachusetts Osteopathic Hospital in Roxbury yesterday afternoon.

"I have nine children and I gave birth to all of them," the Dorchester woman said. "The state isn't going to tell me how to raise my children or where they'll be sent to school."

Valerie Reardon, at 12 the second oldest of Mrs. Reardon's children, had not been in school since last June. She was assigned last fall to a sixth-grade class at the Florence Nightingale School. Mrs. Reardon insisted she go to the Mather School, only five minutes away from the Reardon's home at 147 Bowdoin St., or else "I wouldn't send her anywhere."

Mrs. Reardon contended [that Valerie's] absence from classes "hasn't really affected her that much . . . She stays home and helps me around the house." It was mostly "concern for her safety" that compelled Mrs. Reardon to refuse to allow Valerie to take a bus to the Nightingale School, she said.

"They claimed she was out of the district by two house numbers," she said. "I said if we have a neighborhood school, we should be able to use it."

Mrs. Reardon said she had been visited by a truant officer only once since she took her stand in September. "They wanted to know if I'd change my mind, and I just said no."

After a fire destroyed most of the Nightingale School on October 24, pupils there were shifted to the John Marshall School where Valerie attended fifth grade. Mrs. Reardon sought permission from the principal at Marshall to return Valerie there.

"The principal said no," Mrs. Reardon recalled. "He also said I would be taken to court, but nothing has come of that."

She also met with Rollins Griffith, assistant superintendent of the Boston schools. "He was no help either. In fact, he said—not in so many words—that I was prejudiced. I said four of my children have a colored godmother. How can I be prejudiced?"

Griffith, in New York City on a recruitment trip for the School Department, yesterday said he would not comment on the Reardon case.

"I do not have my records here with me. When I return to the office on Monday I will look into the matter," he said.

Griffith said there were six sixth-grade classes at the Nightingale School before the fire.

"We moved three of the classes into the Lee, Marshall and Fifield schools. The other three were kept at the Nightingale School in portable classrooms. In Boston, students cannot be moved between schools—except for specific reasons—after the first week in November. I am surprised to hear that the child is still at home. The policy requires that the school principal turn the child's name over to the attendance department for routine action," he said.

On Tuesday night, Mrs. Reardon was one of more than 300 parents attending an antibusing meeting at the Francis G. Kane American Legion Post in Dorchester. Midway through the meeting, after listening to remarks by school committeeman John

