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Re-envisioning Ed and Dem

Diversity Within the Community: A New Approach to the Neighborhood School

Neighborhood schools have been the foundation of American society for the bulk of American history. Desegregation efforts in the 1950's began the movement away from neighborhood schools. This resulted in many students being bused away from their own neighborhoods and into others to promote diversity within schools. Over the years, tolerance has increased and neighborhoods, in most cases, have become more diverse than they were 50 years ago. A return to neighborhood schools may have benefits to students and society. There are concerns that segregation may become a problem once again under this plan, but an option for schools choice will help to counter potential racial divides.

A Brief History of the Movement Away from Neighborhood Schools

In 1954, a landmark decision was reached by the Supreme Court, known as *Brown v. Board of Education*, starting the movement towards equality by ordering the desegregation of schools. The desegregation process was augmented in 1971, by the Supreme Court case *Swann v Charlotte-Mecklenburg* (Lord 4), resulting in the institution of mandatory busing. This meant that students would be bused away from their neighborhood schools and into other schools, and in many cases, other districts. Nashville, for example, had to maintain approximately a 75% white, 25% minority distribution in each school (Pride). Many districts had strongly encouraged busing prior

to 1971, but after the Swann court ruling, busing became mandatory in school districts around the country.

A group known as the Positive Action Committee, or PAC, formed in February of 1975 in Delaware as a response to busing for desegregation. This group replaced the Neighborhood Schools Association as the primary anti-busing interest group in Delaware. This group felt that forced busing “took away parents’ rights, harmed the education of children, caused people to flee the public schools, and was very costly” (Raffel). Eventually, through the efforts of the PAC and other anti-busing groups, the Supreme Court reversed its 1971 decision, resulting in the end of mandatory busing in 1991. Many state courts, and therefore many school districts, still followed the original busing order, but eventually, some schools decided it was time for a change.

Positive and Negative Consequences of Busing

There were many arguments for and against busing during this period of court ordered desegregation. Busing seemed to make schools more racially diverse, but opposition was raised against the busing due to the negative effects it had on both students and the community. The options were weighed for many years with no clear solution.

Prior to the Swann decision of 1971, a choice program had been in place, and failed to go far enough with desegregation efforts. The “freedom-of-choice plan,” as it was called, was a system to allow parents to decide which school their child would attend. Under this plan, schools were still strongly separated due to societal beliefs about other races. Racism was still prominent in the culture and, at the time, acceptable.

Following the decision to institute mandatory busing, most schools saw a marked change in the ratio of minority to non-minority students. White enrollment in Northern school districts court ordered to desegregate dropped from 63.3% to 45.8% from 1970 to 1984. Southern court-ordered schools showed a similar decrease, dropping from 61.4% white enrollment in 1970 to 45.8% white enrollment in 1984 (Rossell 152).

Others countered these findings, saying that, although there was more diversity, it was not yet known whether it was actually good for the students. The idea was suggested that busing was actually a racist policy (Pride). This idea stemmed from differences in opinion as to whether busing was attempting to enforce complete assimilation of minorities to white culture or whether busing was just an attempt to ensure an acceptance and understanding of a variety of different cultures. It is wrong to assume that minority children learn best with Caucasian peers. Oftentimes, students learn better with members of their own race, although there is not much conclusive evidence on this subject (Pride).

Busing also impacted the desegregation movement negatively by resulting in “white flight”, where families more out of a neighborhood either because the school their child attends or their neighborhood as a whole has been desegregated beyond their comfort zone. This took on two forms:

- 1) In the case where neighborhood schools were still the primary school institution, families would often change neighborhoods to attend a more segregated school.
- 2) After mandatory busing rendered moving an ineffective method for avoiding desegregated schools, many families chose to place their students in private schools.

This countered desegregation efforts in schools, but was not as large of a problem as some made it seem. Few families could afford to move or pay for private school education to avoid desegregation.

Busing had additional negative impacts as well. One of the most notable was the amount of time spent on a bus, which resulted in less time at home to do homework, be with family, and participate in extracurricular activities. Individual districts had tried to counter this by instituting maximum times for bus rides to schools for desegregation purposes. This time was rarely over an hour, in districts that had implemented a maximum duration for bus rides (Rossel 9). Many districts did away with this after the 1991 decision when busing was no longer mandatory. This resulted in bus rides of over an hour to many schools, including my own. At my high school, some students who participated in extracurricular activities did not get home until 9:00 pm, when their activities ended at 6:00. They were forced to do homework on the bus, and could not concentrate as well, resulting in poorer results on assignments. Many students, even those who did not participate in extracurricular activities did homework on the bus to save time, but with the many distractions found on a crowded school bus, most found it very difficult.

The negative consequences of busing, ranging from the idea of busing as a racist policy to the scholastic and personal troubles it caused students, led to the initial movement to return to neighborhood schools.

Positive and Negative Consequences of Returning to Neighborhood Schools

Many people feel that neighborhood schools are a vital part of the community and should be preserved. Others are concerned that segregation may arise as a problem once again if neighborhood schools become the standard.

Schools function as focal points in communities, providing a base for teaching the youth both information and values. Public schools are one of the few positive institutions in bad neighborhoods, and bring the community together around them. Many stable jobs are produced as a result of schools in the neighborhood (Kahlenberg 200-201).

Some people argue that using neighborhood schools as an instrument to tie the community together is an absurd concept. American society is becoming increasingly more mobile, leaving less community to tie together anyway (Kahlenberg 201). These people promote a choice plan where there is a sort of community on each school campus based more on shared ideas rather than the location of their homes.

Families can also become closer as a result of the return to neighborhood schools. The schools will often reflect family values found in the community. If the schools are closer to home, therefore making them easier for parents to get to, the parents can be more involved in the organization of the school as well as their children's scholastic lives (Pride). Often times, if a school is far away, it is difficult for a parent to attend PTA meetings and meet with teachers. This is especially true in poorer areas where parents may not have cars. When the parents can be more involved, both students and schools benefit.

Some believe this argument is faulty. Involvement had dropped off some after the institution of busing for desegregation. Now that busing is no longer mandatory, parents feel more connected to the school that their children attend. Any school the child attends

is also within busing distance from the parent's house. 80% of city based minority parents had been to a parent meeting in the suburbs and 70% had helped with some sort of fundraising (Kahlenberg 203).

Minorities are often in favor of the return to neighborhood schools to inspire a closer relationship with one's cultural identity and community. The return to neighborhood schools may help to rectify this stereotype by demonstrating that people from all backgrounds have the ability to succeed, even in environments not dominated by white culture. Often times, children learn best with students of their own race as they have a better cultural understanding and sense of pride, allowing them to feel more productive and important as individuals (Pride).

Neighborhood schools may not be the best way to educate students while still maintaining diversity, and a choice option may be a better route. Neighborhood schools seem to promote homogenous communities in some cases, leading to less diverse school environments. While this may not be the case in all cities, the remnants of segregation are still very alive in some parts of the country. To go back to a system entirely based on neighborhood schools may negate all the desegregation efforts, and the strides these efforts made, in the last 50 years.

When the school system is based entirely on neighborhood schools, schools of a lesser caliber often get stuck staying at that level. Usually schools that have less academic success are found in areas of high poverty, and these schools cannot improve without more funding. This funding comes from taxes and if the community members do not have enough money to pay for improvements, as is often the case, the schools cannot improve (Kahlenberg 148).

Taxpayers usually favor neighborhood schools (Pride). People feel better supporting something when they directly see the results. Parents do not want to contribute money to a school or district that their student is not in. The relationship between schools and the community improves as the community can see the product of the schools that it supports.

Supporters of the movement towards neighborhood schools often cite the school's effect on property values as one reason to move back towards neighborhood schools. Following the court order on busing, many homes that previously had very high property values were lowered by the change in school performance. The other side of this is that homes near schools that previously had lower test scores often increased their property values, which was a positive side effect for the poorer groups. Even so, this change was very limited. A large change in test scores, bringing scores from the 25th to the 75th percentile only increases the property values in a neighborhood by 2.9% (Kahlenberg 199).

While it may seem safer to have a school closer to home, statistics actually show that it is safer for students to take buses to school. More than 50% of elementary school students and 75% of high school students live more than 1 mile away from their schools, with the average distance being 2 miles. Only 51 out of the 42,000 traffic fatalities per year involve children waiting at bus stops. School buses are the safest form of ground transport and students who walk to school are 2 to 3 times more likely to be involved in an accident.

Neighborhood schools encourage democracy. Aristotle put forth the idea that democracy worked better in small groups, such as the modern neighborhood as opposed

to the state or federal government. Michael Walzer from Princeton states that “neighborhood control over schools is vital to democracy.” (Kahlenberg 201)

The positive aspects of returning to neighborhood schools seem to outweigh the bad, but not by enough to allow for a pure return to neighborhood schools. There must be other guards to ensure that, while neighborhood schools are the main institutions, they do not become segregated by race, class, or ability level. A series of steps must be taken to ensure the equality of all schools.

Return to Neighborhood Schools: Community and Diversity

The best solution to the debate over the return to neighborhood schools starts with improving all schools. Recently, when more students enrolled in their neighborhood school in Los Angeles than expected, there were not enough textbooks, desks, or teachers. Students and parents organized a sit-in demanding more resources, and eventually received them. This demonstrates that the districts can afford improvements, although it is difficult. Schools must re-appropriate funds to ensure that schools are meeting standards and even surpassing them.

The easiest improvement schools can make is newer and higher quality supplies, including textbooks and desks. A new paint job on a school can do wonders for the morale of the students on the campus. Following physical improvements, efforts can be taken to train teachers better and to provide incentives for good teachers to continue to teach at urban schools. Additional programs can provide for extracurricular activities and after school programs to encourage student achievement.

The concern that the return to neighborhood schools may reverse desegregation efforts is a valid one, which one that can be combated by movements towards mixed income housing. Real estate agents can stress this in their sales, and concerned citizens can take part in mixed housing movements.

Mixed income housing will promote tolerance between people from all walks of life. Stereotypically, minorities have lower income, resulting in diversity in both race and class. Mixed housing benefits those with lower incomes by helping them join communities with higher property values. These communities tend to be able to support their neighborhood schools better, providing the funding for the school improvements outlined above. This benefits everyone by ensuring that all schools are of a high standard, providing more options for all families.

There should still be options for school choice. The magnet program has helped many students reach their full potential and learn more about subjects of interest to them. Mandatory busing, while good for desegregation as a whole, often did not benefit individual students. With options due to a choice plan, students and their families can pick the school that suits them best.

Once schools have improved, all schools will be viable options for families to choose. Different schools work better for different students, and if all schools are achieving at similar levels, the decision will no longer lies between choosing a high achieving school over a low achieving school, but instead deciding which school best suits the student.

Although it will take money and time for these changes to be fully implemented, the return to neighborhood schools is an idea whose time has returned. Society is growing

diverse enough and tolerant enough to choose schools while still maintaining a reasonable standard of diversity. School choice will promote scholastic success and foster a community through the school environment, rather than through the neighborhoods themselves. School choice is the route to take to ensure that all students receive an education that suits their personal needs.

Desegregation

Community and friendships

Value placed on choice

Societal connections

Through school-based communities

Annotated Bibliography

- Johnston, Robert C. "Md. District Plans Return to Neighborhood Schools." Education Week 11/29/00, Vol. 20, Issue 13, p. 3.

This news article details the return to neighborhood schools as applied to a Maryland school district following the end of mandatory busing. They are phasing in the program, starting with current ninth and tenth graders so as to minimize the impact on those already settled into their schools and nearing graduation. Although there needs to be improvements in the instruction and facilities, district board members feel this will be a positive change.

- Kahlenberg, Richard P. All Together Now: Creating Middle Class Schools Through Public School Choice. Washington, D.C.: The Century Foundation, 2001.

The author argues a plan of school choice over that of returning to neighborhood schools or continuing mandatory busing. He cites many arguments against these other options and refutes arguments in favor of these points. Some topics discussed are property value shifts, the role of neighborhood schools, the concept of a neighborhood, as well as other socioeconomic issue pertaining to school choice today.

- Lord, Dennis J. Spatial Perspectives on School Desegregation and Busing. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers, 1977.

This pamphlet outlines the history of desegregation and related court cases, including the Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg case. It goes into the implications of these decisions, including resultant white flight.

- Orfield, Gary. Must We Bus? Segregated Schools and National Policy. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1978.

This book chronicles school integration and the use of busing to achieve it, exploring important ideas about how busing really effected desegregation efforts and whether it is still a worthwhile endeavor today.

- Pride, Richard A. “Neighborhood Schools Again? Race, Educational Interest, and Traditional Values.” Urban Education Sept. 1999, Volume 34, Issue 3, p.389.

The author details, through case studies, the criteria through which families typically choose which school their child will attend. The most prominent factors, according to the studies, are family beliefs, racial attitudes, child rearing goals, and past achievement of the school. It also breaks down, by race and level of parental education, the number of students attending neighborhood schools versus other schools.

- Raffel, Jeffrey, A. The Politics of School Desegregation: The Metropolitan Remedy in Delaware. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980.

The author explains the history and goals of the Positive Action Committee, an anti-busing group that rose in opposition to the Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg decision resulting in mandatory busing. The book provides information about busing for desegregation in general throughout the book.

- Rossell, Christin H. The Carrot or the Stick for School Desegregations Policy: Magnet Schools or Forced Busing. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

The author outlines the benefits that busing had for desegregation and compares it to the success that the magnet program has had in helping to keep desegregation a reality. The author questions which method is currently better for desegregation. A conclusion is reached that voluntary desegregation more fully attains the goal of diversity because it melds the attitudes of all people to actually believe in desegregation, not just comply.