

# Busing: Is it curing or poisoning public school system?

By KIM MARSHALL

Before Boston plunged into desegregation, I taught in an all-black, all-poor middle school in Dorchester, one of many such ghetto schools in the inner city. It was segregated, violent, debilitating, neglected and scorned. Our school improved dramatically as a result of desegregation: The court order brought in significant numbers of non-poor students, black and white, energized the staff and got us involved in improving our program and recruiting students. So when I hear people propounding the myth that Boston schools were marvelous until busing ruined them, I reach for my typewriter.

That myth wasn't true of most of the quieter non-ghetto schools either. In the years before desegregation, the Boston public schools were widely regarded as archaic and inferior, insulated from the creative energy of the New Boston by layers of bureaucracy, patronage and mediocrity. Despite pockets of innovation and quality, the schools were rejected by large numbers of middle-class families in favor of parochial, private and suburban schools.

What has been the effect of desegregation on the Boston school? Let's imagine for a moment that citywide busing had never happened. How would things be different than they are today?

— There would be less white flight from the system.

— There would be less racial polarization in the city.

— There would have been less trauma and disruption for many kids.

On the other hand:

— The system would still be segregated, with most black kids going to inferior schools.

— Tens of thousands of kids would have gone through school with very little contact with people of other racial groups.

— There would be less parent involvement in the schools, which, along with less state and federal scrutiny, would have made the school system a good deal less accountable.

— There would be less involvement by local universities, businesses and cultural institutions.

— The schools would not have received millions of dollars of desegrega-

tion money to improve programs.

— There would probably be no magnet schools, which have added a new ingredient of choice for parents and students.

— The system would probably not have hired and promoted a new breed of professionals with fresh energy and ideas.

— The electorate might not have turned to more education-oriented and less politically opportunistic School Committee members.

On balance, the schools are probably better off than they would have been without desegregation. What's more, the last five years have been a learning experience for kids. They have been exposed to tension, hatred and violence, but they have also seen grace, courage, growth and reconciliation. And, at this point, desegregation is not the issue in most classrooms — teaching and learning are.

But the changes catalyzed by desegregation have not been enough to convince thousands of disgusted parents not to pull their kids out of the public schools. There is the real danger that a continuing erosion of white enrollment over the next few years will make a mockery of the desegregation plan, and also touch off a series of debilitating squabbles over school closings, teacher tenure and layoffs and racial hiring quotas.

The problem may be that the improvements of the last five years have only scratched the surface of the deeper malaise of the schools. According to re-

cent research, certain factors at the level of the individual school make all the difference in how well that school does with its students, and many Boston schools have been neglecting these key factors for years:

— A strong, dynamic, omnipresent educational leader as principal.

— A businesslike approach to starting classes on time, collecting homework, etc.

— High teacher enthusiasm for the curriculum.

— Clear, shared academic goals for each grade level.

— A testing program linked to those goals and used to further them.

— High expectations of kids from the entire staff.

— A clean, safe environment.

These are the basics in education today. Schools that contain these ingredients can have an enormous impact on the lives of all their students. The best way for the Boston schools to reverse the flight of the middle class and turn around decades of decline is to find ways of fostering these key factors in every school, making each building into a magnet school. Long after the battle over forced busing is forgotten, the ability of administrators, teachers and parents to work together on these issues will make or break the Boston schools.

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