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 Bostons 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 desegregati-