

One of a series
of commentaries in
"Tenth Anniversary Blues:
Why Busing Failed in
Boston and the Good
that May Come of It.
Nurturing Public Culture
in a Hotbed of Private
Aspiration

Kim Marshall: Race or Class?

When Judge Garry's decision first went into effect in 1974, I was a white sixth-grade teacher at the Martin Luther King Middle School in Roxbury. In my five years in the classroom I had never taught a white student. I felt I had gotten the hang of teaching effectively (most of the time) in an all-black school, and I viewed the arrival of working-class kids from Dorchester and South Boston with some anxiety. But things worked out well, and by the end of the year I was pleased to be teaching an integrated class.

The next year the judge threw our school a more difficult pitch: we were made an "instant magnet," responsible for attracting white students voluntarily. With great heroics, our staff built an innovative program, recruited students door-to-door, built our enrollment up, and became one of the more exciting middle schools in the city. The market forces of education embodied in the magnet-school concept had the effect of improving our school.

But whether our desegregated students were assigned involuntarily or "freely" chose to come, we were missing another important ingredient of integration, one that the literature of the 1960s and 1970s said was the most important to educational benefits: social-class integration. The failure to involve the suburbs was a major flaw in the entire desegregation enterprise, and by 1975 I wrote a long article saying that this was "a scandal" and proposing a metropolitan voucher plan to involve the suburbs and bring about socioeconomic as well as racial integration. My brilliant plan was greeted with deafening silence, although Kevin White wrote to say that he'd always advocated this.

Doubts and panaceas aside, most of my energy, and that of my colleagues, went into teaching our classes, and that went well. But after the novelty wore off, desegregation was not the issue; education and the quality of our program were, and we were still faced with the same set of challenges we had faced in an all-black school. I became increasingly convinced that despite the fact that desegregation had shaken up

the Boston schools in a number of positive ways, we were still not facing up to the real educational issues.

How has the passage of time affected my views on desegregation? Looking back, I have several observations.

First, it's clear that urban/suburban desegregation is a pipe dream, and I'm amazed that I was naive enough to think it was possible. The Boston schools are going to continue to serve a largely poor clientele (I understand that even the Last White Liberal has pulled his kid out), and the real issue is how well we carry out that mission.

Second, the impact of the court orders on the quality of education has been largely indirect, but it has happened. Increased parent involvement, the magnet-school concept, the hiring of a new breed of educators (many of them black and Hispanic), the election of a more liberal school committee that hired a professional school superintendent, who in turn began to move on the educational agenda (and hired me to assist him) — all this can be traced back to Judge Garry's orders. Slowly it is beginning to pay off.

Third, I feel a curious sort of pride to be working in a system with such a desegregated staff. Even though it was brought about initially by court orders, we now own affirmative action, and in this respect we put every other major public and private organization in the metropolitan area to shame. Beyond the righting of old wrongs, we are a stronger and more effective school system because of this.

It's a shame that the school committees of the 1960s and early 1970s weren't focusing on education instead of intentionally segregating the system and bringing the wrath of the federal courts down on our heads. You could say we lost eight years in getting to the educational agenda, although some Boston schools were working on it all along. But I wonder whether we would ever have gotten to it had we not gone that route. Thank you, Louise Day Hicks!