

Busing in Milwaukee Public Schools since 1979

Goals

Students examine arguments for and against busing by watching a ten-minute video, comparing Milwaukee's experience with that of Charlotte-Mecklenburg, N.C., and analyzing two 1983 letters to the editor.

Central Questions

What are the arguments for and against busing as a way to integrate schools? Why do people oppose it? What benefits come from it? Did it actually end segregation in Milwaukee schools?

Background Information

Despite the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregated schools illegal, a 1960 survey in Milwaukee found that schools in the central city were 90 percent Black. In March 1964, community activists, including attorney Lloyd Barbee, Milwaukee Common Council member Vel Phillips, and Father James Groppi organized the Milwaukee United School Integration Committee (MUSIC). In May 1964, MUSIC organized a boycott of predominantly Black schools, which garnered participation by more than half of the city's African American students. MUSIC also challenged segregated schools through picketing, demonstrations, and other direct actions.

In 1965, when the school board still refused to comply with *Brown v. Board of Education*, Barbee filed a lawsuit charging the board with practicing discrimination. The city fought the lawsuit for 14 years. In 1976, US district court judge John Reynolds ruled that the city had "acted to create and maintain unlawful racial segregation in the Milwaukee public school system" and in 1979, the US Supreme Court confirmed his decision. Milwaukee was forced to desegregate its schools.

The desegregation plan involved redistricting, creating specialty ("magnet") schools, and busing. The majority of students who chose integrated, specialty schools were white, while 80 percent of those being bused out of their neighborhoods were Black. In 1987, after hundreds of thousands of white residents had fled Milwaukee, the court ruled that suburban districts had to participate. For another decade, several thousand urban Black students were bused to suburban schools each year. In the late 1990s, busing was largely abandoned in favor of charter schools and other "school choice" programs, like vouchers, which use tax dollars for private school tuition. Today, the Milwaukee public schools are again largely segregated.

Documents Used in This Lesson:

1. Ten-minute video "The Battle for Busing," *New York Times*. Sept. 9, 2013. A fine overview that focuses on Charlotte, N.C., the first city to implement busing for integration. There is no transcript, so students should take a few notes while watching it.
<http://wihist.org/1vFsM9V>
2. Anti-busing letters to the editor, *Milwaukee Journal*, December 29, 1983.
<http://wihist.org/1w0xpNL>

Document 1: "Battle for Busing" *New York Times*. Sept. 9, 2013, video, 10:18.
<http://wihist.org/1vFsM9V>



The screenshot shows a video player interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with "CHANNELS" and a search icon, followed by the "U.S. & Politics" logo and a "LOG IN" button. The video player itself shows a man in a suit speaking, with a map of the United States in the background. The map highlights Michigan and Detroit. To the right of the video player, there is a text area with the following content:

U.S. & POLITICS - RETRO REPORT
The Battle for Busing
BY Retro Report | Sep. 9, 2013 | 10:18
A story of America's school integration and what happened when the buses stopped rolling.
Related: Article: Desegregation and the Public Schools
Show More

At the bottom right of the video player, there is a social media sharing bar with the Twitter logo and the text "Follow TIMESVIDEO on Twitter".

No transcript is provided. Here's an outline, to help students take notes

- 0:00-0:55 history of segregated schools and busing as a solution
- 1:05-4:00 1971, busing starts in Charlotte, N.C.
- 4:00-5:30 successes of initial busing program
- 5:40-6:15 the results researchers saw a few years later
- 6:20-7:45 1990s opponents of busing
- 8:10-9:30 effects of ending busing
- 9:45-10:05 two systems of education in the United States today

Questions

Document 1: “Battle for Busing” *New York Times*, Sept. 9, 2013.

Because no transcript is provided for this short video, take notes on a separate piece of paper. Then find a partner and agree on answers to these questions, which we’ll discuss afterward.

1. At 1:21, Arthur Griffin starts talking about the segregated schools he attended, before busing. Name three examples he gives of how all-Black schools were worse off than all-white ones. Why were the city’s schools segregated?
2. At 5:40, Dr. Rosaline Mickelson explains some things that happened when students began attending integrated schools. List three of them. Why would those things happen in an integrated school but not in a segregated one?
3. Identify the part of the video that impressed or affected you the most. Why?
4. Today, Milwaukee-area schools are segregated in the same way the video describes at 9:45. How do you think that happened? What do you think should be done about it?

Just what kind of dictators do the Milwaukee School Board members think they are? Who are they to say that we in the rural communities must bus some of our children to Milwaukee schools?

Perhaps they don't realize that they are trying to do more than exchange students from one side of Milwaukee to another. They are trying to uproot students who have attended schools in a rural atmosphere and ship them to a completely different environment.

I personally feel that no way, come hell or high water, will my child ever be bused to Milwaukee to attend school. And I believe that as the integration issue progresses, the Milwaukee School Board will find many more parents such as myself, long-time residents of the "country," who will oppose such a proposal.

If Milwaukee wishes to bus some of its children to outlying area schools and Milwaukee parents are willing to accept that, then I am sure

those students will be welcome in our school systems. But don't try to force us to send our children to Milwaukee. I, for one, will never permit it.

DARRYL GUST

Pewaukee

I don't want to go to school in Milwaukee! I like it where I am. The metro busing plan is unfair. They're *not* going to force me to go to school so far away from home. I'm *not* getting up one hour earlier to ride a bus to school in an unfamiliar area; it's unfair! Also, how much is this going to cost my parents? Are people aware of the money it takes to run buses 10-15 miles to and from schools every day?

Most school districts are concerned about their budgets. They "cut" good teachers every year because of a lack of funds. Proposing to spend thousands of dollars per day to benefit mainly Milwaukee's students lacks common sense, in my opinion.

The metro busing plan is an unnecessary waste of taxpayers' money and disregards students' needs and rights, both in the city and suburbs.

Perhaps school board members should get up one hour earlier to ride the bus to their jobs each day!

Greendale

JULIE KRESKE

Questions

Document 2: Anti-busing letters to the editor, *Milwaukee Journal*, December 29, 1983.

Working with a partner or in a small group, agree on answers to the following questions.

1. List two reasons that Darryl Gust gives in Letter 1 for his opposition to busing students from the suburbs into the city. Now list reasons given in Letter 2. Are those reasons more important, in your opinion, than the benefits that Mickelson listed at 5:40 in the video?
2. Should a higher level of government, like the state or a county, ever be able to overrule a lower one, like a town or a village? On what sorts of issues? Should any government be able to take away an individual's freedom? When?
3. Fold a blank sheet into thirds and head the columns, "Surprise, Realize, and Visualize." In the left column, describe something about the two letters that surprised you. In the center, explain something you realized after discussing the first two questions with your partner. In the right-hand column, imagine a school where people of different races and backgrounds were treated equally and fairly. How would people be different?