

Busing? "If It Can Work Here..."

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SCHOOL busing has become a symbolic expression in America! Depending upon one's point of view, it evokes, on the one hand, vivid images of angry parents, upset students, high costs, riots; or, on the other hand, evidences of racial and social integration, improved human relationships, and strengthened school programs. Everyone has a reaction and an opinion. We are still too inexperienced to have "hard data" concerning the issue, but there are some signs which seem significant.

For ten years, 1962-1972, the writer served as assistant superintendent in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg, North Carolina, public schools. Litigation surrounding this system produced the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the *Swan* case. This ruling has had major implications throughout the country. Charlotte-Mecklenburg is a large school system, some 80,000 pupils, serving primarily an urban and suburban clientele. It is a large district geographically, stretching some 35 miles from north to south and some 20 miles from east to west.

Although a considerable degree of desegregation occurred prior to 1970, the system has operated for the past two years on an arrangement of approximate racial balance in all 102 schools. That balance is 30 percent black and 70 percent white in pupil popula-

tion. This has involved the transfer of some 44,000 pupils within the system. The implementation of such a plan has, indeed, revolutionized the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools. The views expressed here are drawn from this background of experience.

It is a fact that, prior to 1970, educational inequality existed in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. This was established as "findings of fact" in court litigation. The essential "finding in fact" was not that buildings were unequal, or that wide variations existed in staff qualifications or course offerings. It was, rather, that segregated public education, by its very nature, presented biased experiences to both black and white pupils. That is to say that an all white group of pupils brought with them to school experiences, expectations, and attitudes which reflected only one view of life and society.

In like manner, an all, or predominantly, black student body was faced with an equally "special" view. These circumstances were especially serious since much of the educative process built upon the background of the pupils and dealt with social and interpersonal development as well as the mastery

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of intellectual tools. Thus, the most reasonable approach to overcoming these inequalities seemed to be the provision, within the classroom and the school, of a social, economic, and racial mix as a base for equal development for all pupils.

Two most significant developments have occurred in Charlotte-Mecklenburg during the past two years. The first of these has been in the area of human relationships. The desegregation plan forced the staff of the schools and the citizens of the community to deal with their understanding of each other and to come to appreciate individuals as individuals and not as groups.

Further, the development of such relationships could not be left to chance. Extensive workshops were held for staff members. Student communication groups were established. Parents were involved in discussion groups. Churches and other organized groups conducted similar activities. Operating procedures within the schools were changed to facilitate growth in human relationships. The results are evident in the schools and community.

Recent in-depth newspaper interviews with large numbers of pupils have substantiated this view. One such student, a black high school senior, who has traveled 22 miles each way from center city to a suburban high school, reported that he and his classmates are, for the first time, able to joke with each other about differences in views, mannerisms, and styles. Another student, a blue-eyed blond junior, who makes the reverse trip to a formerly all black inner city high school, says mimicry-without-malice has likewise become an accepted form of humor at his school. Both boys cite this example as evidence that they and their fellow students have come to live together in normalcy and understanding. Even one year ago, this would not have been possible.

A second development which busing has produced in Charlotte-Mecklenburg is to

cause the school staff and the community to see clearly deficiencies and weaknesses in the school program. Prior to busing, the assumed homogeneity of pupils made it easy to obscure great differences in achievement in both academic and nonacademic areas. Further, the burden of change was so great as to make even modest curriculum adjustments difficult.

Busing has exposed these weaknesses and has galvanized the school system and the community to action. Such action has produced individualized instructional programs, remedial programs of all sorts, and new thrusts to make classroom activities more relevant to pupils, among others. It brought into the Charlotte-Mecklenburg classrooms last year more than 6,000 volunteers whose understanding of the schools and whose support of pupils and teachers alike have, indeed, been an educational revolution of vast dimensions.

Busing has obvious disadvantages which must be faced. It is expensive. It means more buses and the funds to operate these buses. Funds spent for buses are not available to meet other pressing financial needs. It often means that other physical changes which are expensive must be made.

Busing creates confusion and division within the community. The attitudes of parents are slower to change than those of pupils. These attitudes often reflect negatively toward the schools, with subsequent loss of financial and moral support. Pupils, and their parents, are inconvenienced by long bus rides, by unusual class schedules, by difficulty in participating in school activities beyond the regular school day. It means pupils must make new friends different from the friends of neighborhood groupings.

Busing, nevertheless, is a success in Charlotte-Mecklenburg. "If it can work here," said the chairman of the city's Community Relations Committee, "it can work anywhere in the nation." □

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