News Analysis

It Was Never About Busing

Court-ordered desegregation worked. But white racism made it hard to accept.

By Nikole Hannah-Jones

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When Senator Kamala Harris confronted former Vice President Joe Biden at the second Democratic presidential debate about his support of bills to ban busing for school desegregation during the 1970s and early ’80s, he gave a sort of denial. “I did not oppose busing in America,” he said. “What I opposed is busing ordered by the Department of Education. That’s what I opposed.”

This quickly became one of the most talked-about moments of the debate. Many pundits suggested it was unwise for Ms. Harris to dredge up the racial hurts of a decades-old “failed” policy at a time when the Trump administration is caging children along the border and when Democrats are seeking to retake the White House.

But tellingly, there was little discussion about busing’s efficacy, at least not with facts, or about whether or not busing served its purpose of breaking apart the educational caste system.

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That we even use the word “busing” to describe what was in fact court-ordered school desegregation, and that Americans of all stripes believe that the brief period in which we actually tried to desegregate our schools was a failure, speaks to one of the most successful propaganda campaigns of the last half century. Further, it explains how we have come to be largely silent — and accepting — of the fact that 65 years after the Supreme Court struck down
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school segregation in Brown v. Board of Education, black children are as segregated from white students as they were in the mid-1970s when Mr. Biden was working with Southern white supremacist legislators to curtail court-ordered busing.

The term “busing” is a race-neutral euphemism that allows people to pretend white opposition was not about integration but simply about a desire for their children to attend neighborhood schools. But the fact is that American children have ridden buses to schools since the 1920s. There is a reason the cheery yellow school bus is the most ubiquitous symbol of American education. Buses eased the burden of transportation on families and allowed larger comprehensive schools to replace one-room schoolhouses. Millions of kids still ride school buses every day, and rarely do so for integration.

A crowd in South Boston protested federal court-ordered busing of black students to all-white neighborhood schools in 1975. Spencer Grant/Getty Images

Further, while it is true that close-by schools may be convenient, white Americans’ veneration of neighborhood schools has never outweighed their desire to maintain racially homogeneous environments for their children. Few remember that Oliver Brown, a petitioner in Brown v.
Board of Education, sued for the right of his daughter, Linda, to attend her neighborhood school. Kansas’ state law allowed school systems to segregate at the behest of white parents, and so the Topeka school board bused Linda and other black children past white schools to preserve segregation. Across the South and in parts of the North, black children were regularly bused long distances across district and county lines, because as late as the 1950s, some local governments valued the education of black children so little and segregation so much that they did not offer a single high school that black students could attend.

In other communities, school buses were considered a prized luxury reserved for white children. During my reporting, I have heard many stories of black children walking long distances to their assigned schools and being covered in dust by the passing big yellow buses — paid for with the tax dollars of black parents as well — that were shuttling white children to their white schools.

The school bus, treasured when it was serving as a tool of segregation, became reviled only when it transformed into a tool of integration. As the federal judge who ordered busing for desegregation in the landmark case that eventually made its way to the Supreme Court said, according to the 1978 book “Nothing Could Be Finer”: “Heck, I was bused as a child in Robeson County. Everybody who attends school in North Carolina has been bused. Busing isn’t the question, whatever folks say. It’s desegregation.”

[Nikole Hannah-Jones answered your questions about this article on Twitter.]

When the Supreme Court handed down its radical ruling for racial justice, the white South began a systematic anti-integration campaign known as Massive Resistance. Senator James Eastland of Mississippi joined about one-fifth of the men serving in Congress when he signed the Southern Manifesto, a document sanctioning explicit white Southern resistance to the Supreme Court decision in Brown. Mr. Eastland was one of the segregationists whom Mr. Biden recently praised for practicing “civility” by working across political differences (he has since apologized for that comment). One of the issues Mr. Eastland worked with Mr. Biden on: banning busing for integration.
During the late 1950s and early ’60s, white politicians used every possible means to challenge the legitimacy of the Supreme Court and subvert its integration mandate. They siphoned state tax dollars — dollars that black residents also paid — to fund a separate system of all-white private schools that came to be known as segregation academies, paying teacher salaries and offering white children tuition vouchers to attend. All-white legislatures shuttered schools and entire school systems rather than allow a single black child to attend a “white” school.

Starting in 1959, Prince Edward County in Virginia went without a public school system for five years until the Supreme Court finally ordered the schools to reopen. What happened there is perhaps the most glaring example of the absurdity of Mr. Biden arguing on the debate stage that he did not oppose busing, just federal intervention. The federal government got involved precisely because local and state governments had openly rebelled against the Supreme Court, refusing to undertake even token desegregation.

Just a few years before Mr. Biden was attempting to curtail desegregation, white Southerners were bombing schools. They beat children and civil rights activists. They blackballed parents who dared sign their names to lawsuits suing for compliance with Brown, keeping them from employment and evicting them from their homes. Mobs blocked the doors to schoolhouses to keep handfuls of carefully selected black children from entering.
Many white Northerners initially applauded the Brown ruling, believing it was about time the South behaved when it came to its black citizens. But that support hinged largely on the belief that Brown v. Board of Education did not apply to them and their communities. When black activists in cities such as Chicago, Detroit and Dayton, Ohio, pushed to dismantle the de jure segregation that existed in their cities, white support for the integration mandate of Brown faded.

In New York, after activists had spent years pushing the public schools to adopt a comprehensive desegregation plan, about 460,000 black and Puerto Rican students staged a walkout in protest in February 1964. With the city’s white population declining, school officials had maintained segregation through racial assignment policies, keeping white schools half empty while black schools in some areas grew so overcrowded that children attended in shifts, half for four hours in the morning, half for four hours in the afternoon, while white children got a full day of instruction.

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After the protest, the city agreed to a very small, very limited desegregation plan that would bus children between 30 black and Puerto Rican schools and 30 white ones in a city of nearly one million students. Still, the backlash was swift. A month after the walkout, some 10,000 white parents, mostly women, staged a protest against “busing.” The organizers knew better than to adopt the rhetoric of the white segregationists down South. Instead, they used race-neutral language, saying they were fighting for their own civil rights: the right to keep their kids off buses and in neighborhood schools.
National media converged on the protest, covering it with a sympathetic tone. It was the first known antibusing protest in the country, according to historian Matthew F. Delmont’s 2016 book, “Why Busing Failed: Race, Media, and the National Resistance to School Desegregation.” While the fears of “busing” in New York and other places “outpaced the numerical reality of students transferred for school desegregation,” Mr. Delmont writes, by focusing on busing, people “gave equal weight to black protests against segregated schools and white protests to maintain these segregated conditions.”

For more than a decade after the Brown decision in 1954, the federal government had done little to stop resistance. But beginning in the mid-1960s, for the briefest and rarest of moments, all three branches of government took the mandate of Brown seriously. The Supreme Court ruled that it was not enough for school districts to merely remove the language requiring segregation; they had to actually move bodies around and integrate their schools. Congress threatened to withhold federal funds from school districts that refused to desegregate, and the Justice Department began suing those districts that continued to resist.
Lower courts began to find segregation intentional and therefore unconstitutional outside of the South, and the fear that school integration would come to their own neighborhoods led white Northern legislators in Congress who were working on the landmark 1964 Civil Rights Act to tuck a decidedly anti-civil-rights provision into the law. That provision prohibited “busing” to “overcome racial imbalance.” Mr. Eastland could not contain his glee at the hypocrisy, calling the Northern senators sponsoring the bill “pretty good segregationists.”

By the early 1970s, the South had been blanketed in desegregation orders pursued by the Justice Department and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and put in place by federal judges who often faced down death threats and political and social ostracization with stunning courage.

It was a remarkable time.

Historically in this country, the removal of racist legal barriers has often come without any real effort to cure the inequality the now unconstitutional laws and policies had created. This was different. Led by Chief Justice Earl Warren’s Supreme Court, federal judges were mandating desegregation plans that did more than simply strike down segregation on paper the way past courts had. A series of rulings called for a fundamental destruction of caste schools in this country. Segregation had been forced, so integration would have to be forced as well.

To do so, the courts understood that desegregation required an arsenal of tools, the same arsenal that white families, school boards and politicians had deployed for a century and a half to segregate black children. They included assigning students and neighborhoods to schools based on race, selecting sites to build schools based on the racial makeup of neighborhoods, assigning teachers and administrators to schools based on race, allowing children to transfer into schools based on race and using buses to carry students to and from schools for integration.

Busing became the literal vehicle of integration because in most places black and white people did not live in the same neighborhoods. This was not incidental. The courts understood that in both the North and the South, a dragnet of federal, state, local and private policies and actions had protected white neighborhoods and penned black people into all-black areas, and that this made it impossible in most areas to create integrated schools by simply zoning nearby black and white children to the same buildings. To get integrated schools, courts had to overcome entrenched government-sanctioned residential segregation.

In 1971, in a case involving one of the largest school districts in North Carolina, the Supreme Court laid out the necessity of busing with striking clarity:
Absent a constitutional violation, there would be no basis for judicially ordering assignment of students on a racial basis. All things being equal, with no history of discrimination, it might well be desirable to assign pupils to schools nearest their homes. But all things are not equal in a system that has been deliberately constructed and maintained to enforce racial segregation. The remedy for such segregation may be administratively awkward, inconvenient, and even bizarre in some situations, and may impose burdens on some; but all awkwardness and inconvenience cannot be avoided.

And despite the constant assertion that “busing” failed, busing as a tool of desegregation, and court-ordered desegregation in general, was extraordinarily successful in the South.

In 1964, 10 years after the Brown decision, just 2 percent of black children in the South attended schools with white children. By 1972, nearly half were attending predominantly white schools. After a very short period of serious court intervention and federal enforcement, the South had gone from the most segregated region of the country for black children to the most integrated, which it remains 40-some years later. For the first time in the history of American public education, significant numbers of white children were being ordered to attend the schools that had been deemed good enough only for black children, and black children got access to the superior schools this country had always reserved for white children.

But white Northerners, who were watching as mandatory desegregation orders were breaking the back of Jim Crow education, quickly adapted a savvier resistance than their counterparts in the South. As the NAACP Legal Defense Fund repeatedly persuaded courts to order desegregation upon showing that Northern officials had maintained official — if not public — policies to segregate black children, the resistance increasingly took on “busing.” This allowed white communities and politicians to deny the role of racism and therefore give respectable cover to their resistance.

It was the educational version of arguing that the Civil War was about states’ rights rather than slavery — one could uphold racist practices and systems while arguing that race had nothing to do with it.

**Resegregation Began Three Decades Ago**

American schools were at their most integrated in the late 1980s — except in the Northeast, where they have steadily become more segregated since at least 1968. Percentage of each region’s black students in schools with a student body that is more than 90 percent minority, 1968-2011.
The Republican strategist Lee Atwater, in an infamous 1981 interview, made the strategy plain: “You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say ‘nigger’ — that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, ‘forced busing,’ ‘states’ rights’ and all that stuff.”

It was a hallmark of Richard Nixon’s “Southern strategy” during his presidential campaigns, which relied on unifying white anger about fair housing and school integration to build a successful coalition of white Southerners and white ethnic Northerners.

After Mr. Nixon’s win in 1968, white Democrats were trying to hold on to their white voters. Mr. Biden favored busing for integration when he ran for election in 1972, but changed his mind seemingly because of a Delaware school desegregation case that was working its way through the courts. In his autobiography, Mr. Biden recalled his confrontation with a crowd of white constituents teetering on the brink of violence over the issue.

Mr. Biden flipped. Between 1975 and 1982, he teamed up with ardent segregationists in Congress, including Mr. Eastland, to support no fewer than five antibusing measures. Despite Mr. Biden’s recent claims that he only opposed busing ordered by the Department of Education, the bills tried to curtail the ability of federal courts to order busing and even to limit busing in places where courts had already ordered it.
Between 1975 and 1982, Joe Biden had teamed up with ardent segregationists in Congress to oppose busing students for integration.

Nancy Shia/Archive Photos, via Getty Images

Senator James Eastland of Mississippi.

Leonard McCombe/The LIFE Picture Collection, via Getty Images

Mr. Biden, echoing a sentiment repeated again and again by progressive and conservative commenters in the past few weeks, says he is not and was not opposed to desegregation, just the tool most likely to achieve it.

The response to integration in places like Boston, where riots broke out and black children who were being bused by federal court orders into white schools were pelted with rocks, beaten and called “niggers,” revealed the lie that the fight was for neighborhood schools and not against integration. These white children were in their neighborhood schools.

But it mattered not. White media specifically and white Americans generally were primed for the message. Support for desegregation dropped in the polls. Media and politicians like Mr. Biden, who called busing a “liberal train wreck,” began promoting the message that busing had failed.

A few studies conducted soon after desegregation began did not show a marked increase in black achievement, and detractors pointed to them as further evidence of the failure. Media and politicians blamed busing for the white flight from many cities, even though cities with large black populations suffered extensive white flight whether they instituted busing or not. They said busing stoked racial tensions, as if race relations had been just fine when black people stayed in their place.

And then in 1974 the Supreme Court, stacked with four Nixon appointees, dealt a lethal blow to Northern desegregation. In Milliken v. Bradley, it struck down a lower court’s order for a metropolitan desegregation plan that attempted to deal with white flight by forcing the all-white suburban school districts ringing Detroit to integrate with the nearly all-black city system. By ruling against a desegregation plan that jumped school district borders, the court sent a clear message to white Northerners that the easiest way to avoid integration was to move to a white town with white schools.

The Segregated North

Only two of the 10 most segregated states are in the South. Percentage of each state’s black students in schools with a student body that is more than 90 percent minority, 2011-12.

1 NEW YORK 65%
2 ILLINOIS 61%
3 MARYLAND 53%
4 MICHIGAN 50%

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White parents in suburban Detroit had also couched their resistance in antibusing terms. But court documents from the time show that bus times for many white students would actually have decreased under the plan the court struck down, because in many cases a black Detroit school stood just a few blocks across the city line from white suburban neighborhoods.

**But by then, facts about desegregation** had become largely irrelevant. White Americans opposed busing precisely because it **was** so immediately effective in desegregating schools. As a result, it was turned into a political boogeyman that gave cover to a majority of white Americans, who did not want their children to share schools with large numbers of black children.
When people call busing ill conceived or the worst means of ensuring integration, they conveniently obscure that busing was almost always a tool of last resort, mandated by courts only after lengthy battles with school boards and state officials, by black parents and civil rights groups, failed to produce even modest integration for black children. Judges and attorneys and activists were trying to destroy a racist and segregated educational system in the face of enormous resistance, subterfuge and violence, even in the most ostensibly liberal places.

In doing so, of course mistakes were made. Particularly, desegregation too often shuttered black schools and dismissed black educators because they were not considered good enough to teach white children. Many black activists and communities grew weary of chasing white people across the city as they fled integration, and instead they decided to focus on gaining resources for schools that served their own neighborhoods.

By 1988, just two decades after it began in earnest, desegregation in this country had peaked. Our one real effort to bring the promises of Brown to fruition withered amid the belief that we had tried really hard and failed.

But to say busing — or really, mandated desegregation — failed is a lie.

It transformed the South from apartheid to the place where black children are now the most likely to sit in classrooms with white children. It led to increased resources being spent on black and low-income children. There's a story black people ruefully tell of the day they knew integration was coming to a black high school in Charlotte, N.C.: A crew of workers arrived to fix up the facilities because now white children would be attending. This is how two-way busing worked and why integration was necessary — white people would never allow their children to attend the types of inferior schools to which they relegated black children.

For years, North Carolina's Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools, where the community decided to make busing work, were some of the most integrated in the country, and both black and white students saw achievement gains. The district was forced to return to neighborhood schools after a white family brought down the desegregation order, and Charlotte is now the most segregated district in North Carolina. We should question why in the narrative of busing we remember Boston but not Charlotte.
Research has shown that the early studies purporting that desegregation did not help black children academically were flawed because they attempted to study the phenomenon too soon. If a child has spent 10 years in segregated, inferior schools and just two in a highly resourced, integrated school, one cannot expect marked achievement gains.

We now know that school desegregation significantly reduced the test-score gap between black and white children — cutting it in half for some black age groups without harming white children. No other reform has reduced the gap on this scale. Rather, the opposite is true: The test-score gap between black and white students reached its narrowest point ever at the peak of desegregation and has widened as schools have resegregated.

An economist and professor of public policy, Rucker C. Johnson at the University of California, Berkeley, studied the life outcomes of black children who got access to the trifecta of quality Head Start, increased school funding and desegregation. He saw the entire trajectory of their lives change. Compared with kids stuck in segregated schools, even their own siblings, they were more likely to graduate from high school and more likely to get out of poverty. As adults, they earned more, were less likely to go to jail and even lived longer. The earlier and longer these children got access to integrated schools, Dr. Johnson found, the stronger the results.
Like Kamala Harris, I was one of those kids bused to white schools. Busing was part of a desegregation plan Waterloo, Iowa, adopted using federal desegregation funds after being sued by the NAACP. Starting in second grade and all the way through high school, I rode a bus two hours a day. It was not always easy, but I am perplexed by the audacity of people who argue that the hardship of a long bus ride somehow outweighs the hardship of being deprived of a good education.

No, black kids should not have to leave their neighborhoods to attend a quality school, or sit next to white students to get a quality education. But we cannot be naïve about how this country works. To this day, according to data collected from the Education Department, the whiter the school, the more resources it has. We cannot forget that so many school desegregation lawsuits started with attempts by black parents to simply get equal resources for black schools. Parents demanded integration only after they realized that in a country that does not value black children the same as white ones, black children will never get what white children get unless they sit where white children sit.

I have spent most of my career chronicling the devastating effects of school segregation on black children. I have spent days in all-black schools with no heat and no textbooks. Where mold runs dark beneath the walls and rodents leave droppings on desks for students to clear in the
mornings before they sit down. Where children spend an entire school year without an algebra teacher and graduate never having been assigned a single essay. And then I have driven a few miles down the road to a predominately white school, sometimes within the same district, sometimes in an adjacent one, and witnessed the best of American education. This is not to say that no white children attend substandard schools. But if there is a black school nearby, it is almost always worse.

The black students I talk to in schools that are as segregated as the ones their grandparents attended know it is like this because we do not think they deserve the same education as white children.

This is a choice we make.

The same people who claim they are not against integration, just busing as the means, cannot tell you what tactic they would support that would actually lead to wide-scale desegregation. So, it is an incredible sleight of hand to argue that mandatory school desegregation failed, while ignoring that the past three decades of reforms promising to make separate schools equal have produced dismal results for black children, and I would argue, for our democracy.

It is unlikely that we will ever again see an effort to deconstruct our system of caste schools like what we saw between 1968 and 1988. But at the very least, we should tell the truth about what happened.

Busing did not fail. We did.

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