



# There's a Reason We Don't Say 'Integration' Any More

What the busing debate reveals about how Americans really view diversity.



**By Erin Aubry Kaplan**  
Contributing Opinion Writer

July 9, 2019

LOS ANGELES — By reviving the issue of school busing in the first Democratic presidential debate, Senator Kamala Harris socked it to the front-runner, Joe Biden. Ms. Harris described her childhood experiences with racism in California, and then accused Mr. Biden of standing in the way of a solution by opposing the funding of a federal busing order when he was senator. Mr. Biden didn't just stand in the way, he stood in *her* way, which Ms. Harris called “hurtful.”

Mr. Biden fumbled his response, saying that while he supported busing he didn't support usurping local control over schools to do it. Underwhelming, to say the least, and Ms. Harris won a slew of new admirers with her forcefulness.

Busing as a racial justice issue has been dormant for the last 40 years, and I was very glad to see Ms. Harris elevate this common but complicated experience of the first post-civil rights generation to the national stage. I, too, was bused, to a mostly white school in 1971 in Los Angeles, and I also ran into hurtful resistance. But I found the exchange at the debate unsatisfying, on both sides.

Mr. Biden wouldn't acknowledge that many whites objected to busing for reasons that had much more to do with race than local control. Ms. Harris, meanwhile, focusing her righteous anger on her opponent, missed her chance to make a real case for school equality. Ultimately, both candidates sidestepped the troubling truth about how race has shaped us all.

Integration is something lots of people support in theory. They may even see it as a pillar of American democratic ideals — *e pluribus unum*, the whole working to become one. But they balk at concrete measures to make integration happen, whether it's busing or affirmative action. They vastly prefer that it kind of happen on its own.

Mr. Biden spoke to this compartmentalizing when he said that he supported busing, but not orders handed down from the federal government. Which makes him not racist by temperament (as Ms. Harris was careful to point out) but certainly race-conscious.

Bringing black people into white spaces violates a deeply held belief about the color hierarchy that formed this country and that assigned value to people, property and, later, to schools. All of this tradition was suddenly at risk with the prospect of real integration, which is why it worked as a concept but never as a law.

To many people it also smacked of social engineering, an argument used explicitly by the pro-individual-rights, anti-integration South (“They’re messing with our way of life”). This argument has always resonated to some degree with whites everywhere, especially in cities like Boston; today public school segregation is worse in many Northern cities than in the South.

Busing took many racially sympathetic whites to their limit of liberalism, and while they may not have publicly condemned it, neither did they stand up for it. The ubiquity of white flight — or in the case of Los Angeles, whites staying put but moving the kids into private school — confirms that even white people who may have supported other kinds of civil rights voted a resounding no on integration.

We still struggle with the legacy of that no. There’s a reason we barely even use the word “integration” anymore when it comes to schools (or anything else). The very word critiques a country that has long lived its opposite, separation. Integration demands action, conjuring up images of black people boldly claiming seats at lunch counters and classroom desks.

Instead, Americans prefer the word “diversity.” Diversity is passive — it merely describes who is in the room. Diversity is a quarterly report. It’s free of moral imperative and historical critique.

Diversity has also come to feel optional; these days we applaud a school that’s diverse but don’t worry about the ones that aren’t. The whole framework of school choice papers over the hard, often bitter fight for justice that culminated in the '70s with busing plans and mandates that shaped the lives of kids like Kamala Harris and me.

Diversity’s soft focus also minimizes the role whites had in fueling the steep decline in the quality of public schools by abandoning their own neighborhood schools in the face of impending integration. This is what Ms. Harris and Mr. Biden both surely know, but don’t say.

“We will not fail here,” Berkeley’s school superintendent declared in a report outlining a plan to integrate city schools in 1967. “Where else would there be hope of success if there were failure here, in Berkeley?” But Berkeley did fail to integrate its schools, as did so many other cities that

undertook busing. The Kamala Harris moment gives us a chance to make that failure of integration matter again — to make it not optional, but tragic.

---

Erin Aubry Kaplan, a contributing opinion writer, is the author of “Black Talk, Blue Thoughts and Walking the Color Line” and “I Heart Obama.”

---

#### RELATED

[Kamala Harris and Classmates Were Bused Across Berkeley. The Experience Changed Them.](#) June 30, 2019

[Kamala Harris and Joe Biden Clash on Race and Busing](#) June 27, 2019

[Opinion: The Unmet Promise of Equality](#) Feb. 28, 2018

[Opinion | Erin Aubry Kaplan: School Choice Is the Enemy of Justice](#) Aug. 14, 2018

---

*The Times is committed to publishing a diversity of letters to the editor. We'd like to hear what you think about this or any of our articles. Here are some tips. And here's our email: [letters@nytimes.com](mailto:letters@nytimes.com).*

*Follow The New York Times Opinion section on Facebook, Twitter (@NYTopinion) and Instagram.*

Erin Aubry Kaplan, a contributing opinion writer, teaches writing at Antioch University, Los Angeles, and is the author of “Black Talk, Blue Thoughts and Walking the Color Line” and “I Heart Obama.”