

Unfinished Business:

7 QUESTIONS **7** LESSONS

Linking Boston's "Busing/Desegregation Crisis"
to Struggles for Equity, Access and Excellence for All in
Boston Today



1974 to 2014

Introduction

When the Union of Minority Neighborhoods (UMN) began the Boston Busing/Desegregation Project, we were not thinking that the 40th anniversary of school desegregation was just four years away. UMN was doing CORI (Criminal Offender Records Information) reform with people from economically marginalized communities and public education organizing with Black people. Stories and feelings about that era kept coming up. We weren't historians. We just wanted to understand why this history seemed to be keeping so many stuck and what we could all do about it.

Many remember Boston's school desegregation in 1974 because of the violent opposition. Images of people throwing rocks and riding around slinging racial epithets brought on cognitive dissonance for many who saw Boston as the land of liberty. But more than that, listening to people, reading, and considering how unconsciously the same language and concepts from then are used in current struggles today raised our awareness that this history—like all of our history—must be owned and considered by *all* Bostonians and by the nation as well. We have much to learn.

This report is our contribution to the marking of the 40th year of Boston's Busing/Desegregation crisis. This is not our final report. Many other voices need to be included. What you have here are themes that rose from the last four years of listening and learning. Our core group includes the steering committee's leadership of the project, the voices of many individuals and organizations. They shared stories and advice. We saw implications for leadership that would bring us to race and class equity, democratic access and excellence from public institutions that so many are working to bring about.

This report is not meant to be the last word. Consider this a conversation catalyst to help deepen our questions and our commitment to honestly engage each other around difficult issues we too often avoid. We hope these explorations will lead to wise action. We can no longer avoid the tough conversations. As people of color are scapegoated in tough economic times, as jobs disappear and income diminishes for so many non-elite people and communities, as cities have to choose between blight and being meccas for the ultra-wealthy, Bostonians must find a better way for ourselves and especially for our children.

This report is offered with humility. The more we learn about the experience of this history for each individual and each community, the more we learn about its impact on us today. We must all keep learning about this complexity and uncover what is ours to do in the struggle for equity, access, and excellence. This might mean being a better teacher, a more informed parent, a more strategic activist, a more daring and engaged student. The developed leadership of all of us is needed.

Please imagine that each question is a gateway to new understandings of why this history continues to confound us and how it can inform our efforts for change today.

Why Do We Need to Look Back?

After four years of listening to the stories of people and communities in Boston, we realize that Boston’s busing/desegregation crisis in 1974 was part of larger patterns of race and class inequity. We also better understand how power and oppression have worked historically. All of this helps us make effective change, democratize power, and confront oppression today.

Knowing Then	Knowing Now	THE LESSON: Knowledge of Power IS Power
<p>Some people, largely through privilege, didn’t have to directly deal with the crisis or even know about it. For them, the crisis happened to “others” in neighborhoods or towns next door.</p> <p>Many, however, had no choice but to experience Boston’s school desegregation crisis. They knew the direct impact, as did their families, and/or their communities.</p>	<p>Forty years on, fewer people in the city directly remember the crisis. Some want to remember and some try to forget. Elders, activists and public historians work to keep the memory of this period alive. They emphasize how complex this history is and how old its roots are. Young people and transplants to the city too often get the message that because they weren’t here then they <i>can’t</i> really understand what happened. Their own desegregation stories are dismissed as irrelevant. Too often what people hear about this time is a series of simplified sound bites. For instance, that the crisis was <i>a failed social experiment</i> or <i>the cause of white flight</i> or <i>middle class flight from public schools</i>. They—and we—also frequently hear the message that we don’t really <i>need</i> to know any more, that the past does not impact our lives today.</p>	<p>Through our work, we’ve heard a wide variety of stories emerge about struggles, then and now, for race and class equity, democratic access, and excellence. Boston’s desegregation crisis was a pivotal time in the city’s history. The crisis is also part of the larger history, locally and nationally. That history is manifest in two ways: an underlying, repeating pattern of the use of power to benefit some communities while excluding and oppressing others, and also long-standing movements of resistance to this exclusion and oppression. Access to a more complete picture of this history is access to knowledge about how power works to enable and limit us. That access allows us to focus our individual and collective efforts to make real social change.</p>

Why don't people just get over it?

We've heard frequently that people need to “get over” what happened to them both on an individual and a community level: The rest of city has moved on and so should they. Often a question follows: Why do you want to dredge up this painful period again? BBBDP has learned that we are not dredging, that we are surrounded and impacted by this history every day. The more we ignore it, the more it festers, mutates, and reappears.

Trauma THEN	Trauma NOW	THE LESSON: We Must Acknowledge and Address the Trauma that Lingers Today
<p>One overarching lesson about this history is the trauma of violence experienced by individuals and communities during school desegregation. This violence, mental, emotional and physical, occurred across the city and affected each person and community differently. Some faced bus violence every day as a student, others watched hatred spewed at friends and family, some regret assaulting others or seeing loved ones betray their stated values. On the community level, many shared that desegregation signaled the end of strong community institutions and ties. Whatever the source, the pain that many suffered and often continue to suffer from this era compounded when it was never properly acknowledged, discussed, or healed.</p>	<p>A persistent narrative since the 1970s and into today says individuals and communities need to “get over” what they experienced during and after the desegregation crisis, that by holding onto it they hinder progress in the city. We found value in noting who is being told to move on, what they are being told to move on from, by whom, and why. Whose and what interests are being served by “moving on,” and whose and what interests are being silenced and dismissed. Many people and communities who suffered during and after school desegregation have since been marginalized in many ways. Many who have not been marginalized often find the period too difficult to look back on or talk about.</p>	<p>Many of those who experienced desegregation are still with us today, as are their children, their grandchildren, their communities, and the leadership of key institutions in our city. Trauma has not remained isolated to the individuals who experienced it, but has been passed down through the generations. Trauma deeply influences the course of the city, and, as part of a larger history, the nation. True reconciliation for these wounds and others has hardly begun. Refusing to face what happened to individuals, communities, and institutions allows the same traumatic patterns to repeat themselves. That refusal keeps us from properly mourning and honoring the sacrifices that were made during this period, often by children and parents with no other options. To move forward as a city, we need to acknowledge and help heal the trauma that festers in the people and communities of Boston.</p>

Whose City Is It?

Desegregation was not only about sending students to different schools; it also raised deep issues of inclusion and exclusion in the city. A tension continues between community cohesion and cultural integrity on one hand and equitable access and community diversity on the other. Too often, these goals are at odds, rather than complementary.

Belonging THEN	Belonging NOW	THE LESSON: Value Both Community Cohesion/culture and City Diversity/access While Maintaining a Commitment to a City that Belongs to All of Us
<p>When we talk to people about Boston in the 1970s, the subject of turf usually comes up – who was able to go where in the city. This was often a racialized issue, with a white majority keeping people of color out of schools, neighborhoods, and public office.</p> <p>But conflict also happened within racial groups and across other boundaries - Asian and Black kids fighting in Dudley, or white South Bostonians not feeling welcome in Charlestown. People protected their own racially, ethnically, and income-segregated communities, and they wanted to have a say in what happened in those communities, including their schools.</p>	<p>Although the turf issues of Boston are not what they once were, in an era of increasing gentrification we are still left with questions: Who gets to have a say about what happens in neighborhoods? Who gets to choose an excellent education? These are not questions Boston alone must face. Across the country municipalities hold onto their educational “turf” through unequal funding systems that privilege those at the “top” of wealth-based and/or racial hierarchies.</p>	<p>School desegregation called into question the practices of exclusion that were so pervasive in Boston at the time. Unfortunately, they remain pervasive today. Desegregation also raised fundamental questions about community control, race, and culture that have yet to be answered. To build a city that belongs to all of us, we need a balance between communities having an active say in their own governance and coming together across difference. One refrain we heard in collecting stories was: Why didn’t they just make every school across the neighborhoods excellent, instead of busing students out of their neighborhoods? This question is deceptively simple, but leads us to one of the core learnings for BBDP: Public education is about far more than the school setting – it is about resources, place, and community. Our ability to grapple with values and questions of access, diversity, inclusion, and community is not only essential for building an excellent public education system; it is also essential for widening equality of opportunity and strengthening democracy.</p>

Was it about racism or was it about class?

During this project, we heard two conflicting narratives. One said the crisis was about racism and not class. Another claimed class, not racism, was the real problem. Our four years of listening and learning have taught us that **racism and class stratification are both part of the story of Boston's school desegregation crisis and a part of the reality of the city today.** To understand the legacy of this history, we must have a more honest exploration of how racism and class stratification have supported one another. To truly understand the workings of racism and class stratification and how they interact, we need definitions that go beyond individual acts of bigotry, elitism, and exclusion. We need a systemic analysis that includes the role of institutions in perpetrating both forms of oppression.

Race and Class THEN	Race and Class NOW	THE LESSON: We Need Race and Class Literacy
<p>The racial aspects of Boston's school desegregation crisis are undeniable. Perhaps for most people, the crisis is a story of racial stratification and the nation's journey from legal racial segregation to legal "desegregation." The crisis is also a story of Boston's history of movements for race equity in public education going back to the 1700s—like the Black education movement.</p> <p>Others focus on school desegregation and the tactic of busing as a crisis of historical class antagonisms. They describe the root of the problems as the wealthy and powerful imposing their will on low-income citizens and communities. Many then minimize racism as factor or exclude it altogether.</p>	<p>Because we never fully recognized the way racism and class stratification melded together in our history, we continue to be blinded to or deny both forces in the city today. Boston is one of the nation's most racially segregated and most gentrified cities. Yet as racism and class stratification persist, we talk about both less directly today than we did in the 1970s. Coded language that masks inequities makes us even less equipped to address these issues, because we fail to name them clearly.</p>	<p>When the larger context of racism and class stratification is unexplored, we cannot fully understand the legacy of school desegregation today. Furthermore, we have a limited vocabulary to talk about racism and class stratification in our city. Many people don't know how to have these conversations and are uncomfortable when these topics come up. However, the problems in our schools are not separate from the intertwined issues of race and class at large in our city. We cannot address them separately. Public education needs curricula that creatively teach us how to think about race and class from a systemic perspective and address racial and class inequities. The media need to tell ongoing stories about both race and class to help educate the public and build race and class literacy.</p>

Whose Story is it?

The story of the school desegregation crisis in Boston is often told as a story of Black and white communities, schools, families, and students. This was never the whole story. In addition, the demographics in Boston have changed drastically since the busing/desegregation crisis.

The Story THEN	The Story NOW	THE LESSON: To Build a Better Boston, Stories Must be Heard in the Context of Persistent Racial Hierarchies
<p>While Boston had a diverse population in 1974, the two largest racial groups were white and Black, with a Black population that was smaller then and than in many other major U.S. cities. Asian and Latino families living in Boston at that time dealt with a white-dominated system that classified them as “other” and used them as a “buffer” in a divided city as a way to maintain a racial hierarchy. In fact, Asian and Latino communities played a significant a role in school desegregation, calling attention to issues of language and of cultural identity that impacted all racial groups.</p>	<p>Today Boston is more racially/ethnically diverse than ever. In racial and neighborhood politics, Latino and Asian families are often still invisible in Black/white framing. The breadth of the terms Asian and Latino has become more apparent because of the growth and diversity of both of these racial/cultural groups in Boston and the country. Power in these communities also continues to grow but so do dangers like immigration racism. At the same time, racism is still grounded in a Black/white divide and a racial hierarchy that reproduces both race and class inequities.</p>	<p>Exclusive focus on Black and white conflict can render Asian and Latino communities invisible. At the same time, the Black/white divide and the racial hierarchy it reinforces continues to function now, impacting Blacks, whites, Asians, Latinos, and underrepresented racial groups like Native Americans. Although the racial hierarchy impacts all communities differently, it holds both white supremacy and wealth disparity in place. Developing a clearer understanding of how race and racism have functioned historically and now to preserve power and opportunity for some and deny power and opportunity to others is crucial for developing strategies for creating race and class equity. Even 40 years after the Boston desegregation crisis and 60 years after the Supreme Court’s decision to desegregate the nation’s public schools, we still need to understand, confront, and dismantle the unjust systems of racism that corrode democracy, perpetuate racial divides. These keep us all from being our best selves, communities, institutions, and nation. We must find new ways to support individuals and organizations who are engaged in this critical task in our increasingly diverse and interconnected world.</p>

What is excellence?

A common story we hear is that our society knows what works, what “excellence” is, but lacks the will to deliver it for all of our children and citizens. This is a part of the story, and we have found another important lesson about excellence: **No one standard of excellence exists, nor one way to assess or achieve it. Excellence is the result of a system that invites, is shaped by, and learns from all cultural ways, rather than trying to fit everyone in one box.**

Defining <i>Excellence</i> THEN	Defining <i>Excellence</i> TODAY	THE LESSON: An Equitable, Inclusive and Welcoming School System will Nurture Culture, Creativity and Challenge in All Students
<p>One objection to Boston’s school desegregation was that it was the work of “outside experts” defining what was best for the city and its schools.</p> <p>Another was that “excellence” was rationed: Instead of ensuring that all schools were excellent, the game was to move children from school to school, regardless of the quality of these schools.</p>	<p>We see the same attitude today. No “experts” can come up with the one best way to which everyone else must adapt. The school system continues to be radically uneven in terms of school quality, and the emphasis continues to be on providing students a shot at attending a “good school” rather than on making all schools excellent.</p>	<p>We reject corporate-driven education reforms focused on standardization. How people define excellence is culturally contingent, we have learned. We need a public education system that draws from our diversity to define and achieve excellence. People are their best selves when they feel understood and respected – something that can only happen in a city that is responsive to their own ways of knowing and being: Excellence cannot be achieved through a single standard or way. The racial, ethnic, and economic diversity of our students should be reflected throughout our public education system, from its governance by the State Department of Education on down. This more diverse workforce must have the cultural competence to teach all of our children, and must be accountable to the communities in which our children live. We must re-vision excellence in our system to make these values central, and to create the mechanisms that ensure these values are being achieved.</p>

Isn't Boston Different Now?

The debate about whether we live in a “new” Boston recurred during this project. Some believe that Boston has changed so much in the last 40 years that the issues that created and fueled the desegregation crisis are no longer relevant. Others believe that nothing has really changed, that the “new” Boston is simply a cosmetic change from the old one. Positioning this issue as a simple either/or choice limits our ability to understand and tackle the challenges we face as individuals, communities, and as a city.

Boston THEN	Boston NOW	THE LESSON: We Still Have Work to do—Unfinished Business—To Become “One Boston”
<p>The Boston of the 1970s was divided racially, ethnically, and economically. White neighborhoods, though some were poor, worked to protect their monopoly on resource allocation. In doing so, they marginalized other racial groups' participation in civic life while operating the public school system in a way that ensured continued segregation.</p> <p>At the same time, working class and impoverished communities had a history of being displaced or infringed upon by those with more resources.</p>	<p>Many people still experience racism in the city and see it operating in our politics.</p> <p>In addition, the city is more diverse than ever, while segregation has increased in our schools and in our neighborhoods.</p> <p>Although wealth in the city has increased, economic inequality is high and growing.</p>	<p>When we say Boston is better now, people who still experience challenges in our race and class dynamics feel silenced and unseen. Instead of trying to decide whether we are better or worse as a city than in 1974, we are productive by telling a different story: We still have work to do to ensure equity, access, and excellence for all in the city and its schools. This story acknowledges changes while recognizing our challenges, and opens up space for a dialogue about our past, present, and the future we want for Boston.</p> <p>What mistakes have we made? What positive changes have we achieved? Where do we go from here? Who has been left out? These questions can move us beyond a polarizing debate towards finding real solutions that are shaped by our shared vision, shared leadership, and joint action to define and produce the results we want.</p>